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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH - HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?

A COMMUNITY NUTRITION EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

BY

RENATE ODDY (C)

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
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OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

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TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

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SPRING 1991

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The undersigned certify they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH - HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT? A COMMUNITY NUTRITION EDUCATION EXPERIENCE submitted by RENATE ODDY in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION in ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION.

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Date April 18/1991

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this small case study was to describe and evaluate the participatory approach to a community-based nutrition education program, aimed at hard-to-reach adults. Analysis of the qualitatively gathered data confirmed that when the educator's practices are based on a partnership or participatory model of education, learners are willing to

1. take responsibility for determining program content and activities and
2. make changes in their shopping/eating behaviour.

The learners in this workshop series clearly articulated their preference for very small groups, for flexibility in the program design with opportunities for hands-on experiences, and most of all for a learning climate in which they are heard, accepted and valued. This requires educators who are guided by a clear working philosophy and who understand people in their physical and social context; educators, whose educational approaches are grounded in the experience of the learners; educators who are willing to commit time, energy and budgets to this approach and who are prepared to challenge personal values in the ongoing attempt to understand themselves better; and last but not least educators who share with the participants an excitement for learning.

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Thank you to the Consumer Education Project and its staff for making this study possible and for the continued interest in its progress.

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I consider myself very fortunate to have a family that is ready to listen and question, to support and encourage.

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CHAPTER ONE

Nature of the Study

1. Introduction

Consumers are daily bombarded with media-borne messages on health and nutrition. These messages are often conflicting, sometimes frightening and, at best, confusing. Nutrition educators, for their part, are searching for innovative ways to reach consumers. Some are especially concerned with individuals and families whose access to accurate information may be impeded by barriers such as educational or ethnic background, socio-economic status, lack of language and reading skills, psycho-social problems or any combination of these. "In the past, nutrition education has, for the most part, been defined as information about nutrients in foods; how nutrients affect growth, bodily development, and function; and how diets should be composed to satisfy the best balance of nutrient intake, according to recommendations" (Mosio & Barth, 1985). But over the last few years there have been strong suggestions from several nutrition educators (Kent, 1988; Mosio & Barth, 1985; Unesco, 1983) to broaden the

context and to include social, political and economic factors which may affect nutrition, and to encourage active analysis of concrete circumstances in which people decide for themselves that changing behaviour would be in their best interest. With this shift in content a rethinking of teaching approaches seems to go hand in hand. The emphasis has moved from teaching to learning, with an attempt to get people to develop an understanding of their own situation, in their own terms.

Findings from a meta analysis of nutrition education research indicate the popularity of the following traditional instructional strategies: lectures, written materials and directed small group activity (Johnson & Johnson, 1985). Guthrie (1989) claims that "traditionally print has been the medium of choice of nutrition educators". But, assuming someone is inclined to learn through reading, print material can only be successful when the reading level is appropriate for the reader and when the information is presented in a way that can be easily understood. The educator's aim, however, is not only to transmit information but also to actively involve participants in all stages of the learning process. It is likely that this approach will enable participants to apply the new information, and at the same time enhance the learners' self-esteem and

promote a feeling of increased control and power over their lives.

One agency to explore the meshing of the broadened scope of nutrition education with the process of participatory education is the Consumer Education Project of a Community College. The staff work in community-based settings, often cooperatively with other agencies, with the goal of reaching hard-to-reach individuals and families. Given a philosophical base which supports the notion of working with rather than for people and an increasing interest in popular education approaches, the educators are searching for an educational model that will incorporate the goals of the learners and educators into the context of a participatory learning situation.

It is in this context that I became interested in analyzing the participatory approach to nutrition education and in establishing criteria for its quality and effectiveness, especially in the light of the dilemma many educational institutions and, of course, underprivileged consumers, are facing. On the one hand Health and Welfare Canada in its Call for Action (1989) recommends "support [for] community-based nutrition initiatives by allocating substantial financial resources for large-scale demonstration projects in community

nutrition; small-scale innovations; and the transfer of effective programs to other communities and agencies" and encourages "evaluation of nutrition and health promotion programs through funding" (p.10). On the other hand, budget cuts increasingly undermine peoples' quality of life, food security and access to education. Therein then lies the challenge for nutrition educators: to bring nutrition to the community, to reinforce the positive food choices people are making and to raise awareness of those who face potential barriers to healthy eating (Health and Welfare Canada, 1989).

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was

1) to observe, describe and analyze a participatory education process in action;

2) to evaluate the effectiveness of the participatory learning process through a qualitative research approach, the "potential of which is largely untapped in nutrition education" (Achterberg, 1988c, p.248).

The question that has been the driving force behind this study was:

What is the value and effectiveness of a participatory community-based nutrition program for hard-to-reach adults?

In order to answer this question it became necessary to ask several further questions. These will be addressed in some detail in Chapter Four.

1) What are the most effective features and activities of the participatory education process?
2) What is the learners' level of satisfaction with the key features and activities of the participatory education process?
3) What characteristics of adult learners can be identified by the participatory education process?
4) What has been the learners' knowledge gain?
5) What changes in eating/shopping behaviour have occurred?
6) What is the learners' level of satisfaction with what they have learned?

3. Definition of terms

Two terms are crucial for this study. One describes the population, the other the educational process.

Hard-to-reach adults are defined as

- social allowance recipients or working poor
- English as a second language speakers
- low literate individuals

Participatory education

- "is a learning/teaching process wherein all participants are involved in...defining their own learning needs and wants, working out an approach to addressing them, and evaluating that process...all within a context of making life better for themselves and those around them" (Sauvé, 1987).
- It is not an educational tool or method per se but a "methodological phenomenon--relating methods to their context, and comparing them" (Schwab, 1987).

4. Assumptions

The major assumption underlying this study was that participants would provide genuine feedback to the best of their ability. In addition it is assumed that every person can learn and grow and contribute to making the world a better place.

5. Relevance of the Study

In recent years increased attention has been given to finding effective ways to reach adults who live in poverty and whose lives are characterized by poor health, isolation, unemployment, low literacy skills and low self-esteem. While efforts to reach hard-to-reach adults are not new, the emphasis has shifted from seeing learners as "objects" of instruction to involving them as partners in learning. Campbell and Desjardins (1988) suggest that "research projects structured to ensure maximum involvement of the participants may be an innovative way to educate a hard-to-reach audience, and a more effective way to stimulate community action by the participants than more traditional didactic educational

approaches" (p.168). Michael Schwab (1987) favours the participatory approach over other approaches, because it

> seeks to know about people...from the inside as it were, by engaging with them in a form of active, mutual relationship. This is held to be the most effective way to understand their predicament and to help resolve it. The subjective reality-as-experienced of the one who is researched, or planned for, is the starting point and continual point of reference for the inquiry...The participatory approach calls for a close liaison between researcher and researched...a mutuality which is regarded as the optimal path (p.6).

One of the limitations of this study is that the researcher had to combine the role of primary investigator with that of educator. The researcher, therefore, had the added responsibility of attempting to minimize the effects of bias on this study.

This small case study is delimited to those learners who participated in the community nutrition course offered in the north-east section of the city in the spring/summer of 1990.

6. Organization of the Report

This chapter has provided a brief introduction to the nature of this qualitative research study. Chapter Two presents a review of relevant literature in nutrition education, first from a historical perspective, then from an audience perspective. Educational strategies for hard-to-reach audiences, especially the participatory education approach are highlighted. Chapter Three describes in detail the methodology used for both engaging in the participatory process and for studying it. Chapter Four gives an account of the setting, the participants and the learning experience and an evaluation of the participatory approach from the perspective of the educator as well as that of the learners. Reflections on the participatory approach, the learner and the role of the educator make up Chapter Five. It is this chapter that some of the learners read and commented on. The last Chapter summarizes the findings of the study, draws conclusions from the insights gained from this joint venture between researcher, practitioner and learner and outlines implications for each.

CHAPTER TWO

Discovering the Participatory Approach

This chapter outlines some of the findings and conclusions found in the literature pertaining to the rather broad topic of "participatory approaches to community nutrition education". It addresses 1) the emergence over time of current innovative educational approaches to nutrition education, 2) the search for appropriate educational strategies for hard-to-reach audiences, and 3) some characteristics of the participatory approach which may strengthen the theoretical framework underlying effective nutrition education.

1. Historical sketch

Nutrition education has traditionally been offered in schools, colleges, and communities with the aim of transmitting information which would assist people "to adopt practices that are conducive to long term health" (Contento, 1990, p.6). Jean Mayer (in Achterberg &

Trenkner, 1990, p.189) said that "nutrition is an agenda, a set of scientific disciplines whose end is action...whose goal is to benefit mankind". Results of a meta-analysis of nutrition education programs offered over about 70 years seem to indicate at least partial success of these goals. In addition to a marked increase in knowledge about nutrition and in positiveness of attitudes toward eating nutritiously some constructive changes in patterns of food consumption have taken place. "These findings should provide considerable encouragement to nutrition educators on the efficacy of nutrition education" (Johnson & Johnson, 1985, p.S20). However, over the last 20 years nutrition education has undergone dramatic changes.

During the sixties nutrition education programs emphasized nutrition themes and concepts through demonstration, discussions and other techniques, "primarily of the traditional face-to-face didactic type (Unesco, 1983), p.23). Evaluations were rarely done because programs rested on the "unquestioned assumption that nutrition education is worthwhile". By the start of the seventies new concepts and trends in nutrition education were "more properly concerned with education or communication rather than just nutrition problems" and education shifted to a more promotional approach,

developed in response to the success of mass media techniques. In addition, systems analysis became popular and the field broadened to include such subsystems as food supply, processing, distribution and consumption.

In the last decade yet another trend has emerged. It is rooted in adult education as a developing discipline. This innovative approach owes many of its ideas to the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire. It is learner-centred rather than content-centred; it places the learner in a key role in assessing needs and finding solutions. It is sometimes also referred to as community problem solving, popular education or participatory education. Freire argues that the "participation of people in the improvement of their lives is a higher goal than specific improvements in which they play no direct part (Unesco, 1983, p.28). A computer search for concrete examples of research and practice, using participatory approaches in the field of nutrition education as suggested by Freire, netted few results. While some attempts are being made at using this approach in North America most reports about the application of this approach to learning come from developing nations (Unesco, 1983; Clark, 1990). However, a fairly recent definition of nutrition education attempts to at least acknowledge some of the

current ideas from the field of adult education. It states: "the process of nutrition education may be defined as teaching the validated, correct nutrition knowledge in ways that promote the development and maintenance of positive attitudes toward, and actual behavioural habits of, eating nutritious food (within budgetary and cultural restraints) that contribute to the maintenance of personal health, well-being, and productivity" (Johnson & Johnson, 1985, p.2). The authors then stress the need to employ "instructional strategies that promote active involvement of participants and are related to factors of social context and interpersonal interaction that have been found to influence knowledge acquisition, attitude development, and behavioural change". Nutrition education is no longer an isolated subject, teaching isolated skills and behaviours but an integrated discipline faced with the challenge of placing nutrition advice in the proper perspective and committed to deepen our understanding of what it means to be human (Vaines, 1989).

2. Educational Strategies for Hard-to-reach Audiences

Growing concern about food access problems and the nutritional status of low-income people has given rise to policies and programs to address these problems. Often the emphasis has been on educational interventions, and educators have been challenged to find effective means of reaching a population characterized not only by low income but often also by low literacy, unemployment, isolation, low motivation and low self-esteem.

A very small inductive study done in Toronto was recently reported by Campbell and Desjardins (1989). Members of 20 low-income households described the strategies they used to manage their rather scarce resources. On the basis of the study six hypotheses were proposed which could potentially influence programming strategies for this target group. While five of the hypotheses deal more with the context of food selection and consumption the sixth addresses the educational dimension. "Research projects structured to ensure maximum involvement of the participants may be an innovative way to educate a hard-to-reach audience and a more effective way to stimulate community action by the participants than more traditional didactic educational approaches" (p.168). In

the same report Campbell and Desjardins introduce the term "food stress" (p.168) which people can experience regardless of whether participants currently suffer from an acute food shortage or not. They found that considerable stress was experienced in acquiring and managing food supplies due to transportation and storage problems, lack of support systems and lack of self-awareness. The researchers conclude that an appreciation of all of these issues needs to be systematically incorporated into nutrition intervention programs targeted for this group.

In a survey by Crocket, Perry and Purie (1989) on "Nutrition Intervention Strategies Preferred by Parents" respondents identified problem areas that may interfere with making eating behaviour changes and then ranked interest in selected approaches for nutrition education. The researchers found that the traditional approach of parent group meetings was rated least attractive and that strong incentives must be used for parents to participate in educational schemes. This is significant, because these parents were well educated and did not have the confounding barriers to learning the hard-to-reach learners would have.

Another avenue traditionally used by nutrition educators has been print, for a variety of reasons, such as its

popularity and relatively easy distribution (Guthrie, 1989). Concern over the appropriateness of print materials for hard-to-reach audiences has sparked some research, notably by Susan Nitzke (1989), who used the production of a nutrition pamphlet by a learning group not only as participatory approach to education but also as a means of testing its appropriateness for and acceptance by low-income groups. Nitzke concluded that the receiver-assisted pamphlet created through the Language Experience Approach was indeed effective in increasing personal relevance of written materials for low-literacy audiences.

Rosenblum and Darkenwald (1983) on the other hand expressed cautious hesitation before giving learner participation their total support. In their research they critically examined and questioned the notion of increased ownership through participation by the learners, but they did not discredit the proposition that participation in planning could indeed result in better-designed or more relevant courses and therefore in greater achievement and satisfaction. The writers conclude that there is a need for further controlled experimental research to study the effects learner participation may have on course planning. They also recommend more research to "examine other variables that

may be affected by learner involvement in planning. For example participatory planning may promote more active participation in the learning process, greater group cohesion, or even enhanced motivation and capability for self-directed learning" (p.152).

Olson and Kelly (1985) are also calling for more research and theory building in order to predict "which educational strategy will be effective for a particular purpose with a particular audience" (p.284). At the same time they acknowledge the need for qualitative research on nutrition-related behaviours in the search for a model or models for effective nutrition education.

Critics of some of these attempted interventions have challenged nutrition educators to examine the paradigm guiding their practice. Based on a paternalistic health system many a professional takes on the role of a "dominant, authoritarian, expert figure, whose main interest is in controlling the behaviour of those receiving help. As such, the expert professional assumes full responsibility for all patient-oriented decisions" (Achterberg & Trenkner, 1990, p. 189). This potentially contributes to a cycle of dependence in which the "clients" assume a passive and compliant role and expect the "expert" to solve their health problems for them. Warwick (in Rody, 1988) has termed this generally

practised model the Machine Model; Brickman (1982) refers to it as the Medical Model: Objectives are centrally developed, services are delivered to passive and unquestioning beneficiaries, goals are defined and measurable, the system is efficient. Educators would assert that this approach is extreme, but "many nutrition intervention programs are organized from the 'top down' rather than from the 'bottom up', in that the professional health system and government agencies usually initiate and retain power and control over the programs. While 'community participation' and 'bottom-up' planning have become fashionable themes in nutrition program planning, they remain largely rhetoric" (Rody, 1988, p.133). In his 1982 article Brickman next discusses the Moral Model of helping. Individuals are held responsible for both the cause of their problems and for finding solutions. The educator merely provides information and motivation. Achterberg & Trenkner (1990) argue that both these approaches are inappropriate models to guide nutrition education. "No educational effort should morally foster the submissiveness required by paternalism, and the simple provision of information... (promoted by the Moral Model) cannot be considered adequate for nutrition educators either" (p.190). But Brickman (1988) discusses other alternatives. The

Enlightenment Model assumes that people are responsible for problems but are unable or unwilling to provide solutions and need discipline. In the Compensatory Model people are seen as not responsible for problems but responsible for solutions and are believed to need power. Achterberg & Trenkner (1990) caution that this approach could lead to a "highly stressful, alienating environment for an individual that may eventually cause one to overreact and/or feel inadequate and fearful" (p.191). It appears that while different models may be effective in certain situations, these models all have their limitations. Roter (1987) introduced a Decision-making Model for health educators, where a partnership between provider and client is emphasized in active participation of both parties. Achterberg & Trenkner (1990) suggest combining the Compensatory Model with shared active participation. This perspective is reflected in their definition of nutrition education as the

> process in which an educator seeks to deliberately and progressively empower learners to act on food and nutrition-related issues, such that the learner will gradually be freed from the intervention. According to this perspective, our educational strategies must be characterized as learner-centred and learner-active (p.192).

Over the last few years it has become popular to speak of "empowerment" in the context of education. In an article written prior to the one quoted above, Achterberg (1988a) defines empowerment as enabling people "to act in ways consistent with their knowledge and beliefs" (p.240) and as freeing a person from the intervention, so that learners in the end no longer rely on the educator or the learning tools for direction. Rody (1988) takes the definition a step further:

> I define 'empowerment' as enhancing people's capacities to control their own lives by defining, analyzing, and acting upon their health and nutrition problems to their own satisfaction (p.133).

Rody (1988) feels that many administrators of programs find this approach time-consuming and inefficient. They hesitate to give up power and control and to let beneficiaries of services examine problems for themselves and interact with program employees to define their own problems and develop their own solutions. Labonte (1989) is scathing in his assessment of current health promotion practices. "We define their deficiencies, and calculate how we might manipulate them into acting in ways we think best. We deny people choice and, intentionally or by accident, subtly or blatantly, rob them of their own

capacity for power" (p.24). He claims that because of the Latin root of "power" (potere - the ability to choose) we "cannot empower anybody, because to presume to do so strips people of their ability to choose. "Groups and individuals can only empower and motivate themselves" (p.24). He goes on to describe a successful community project in Toronto in which low income participants tried to come to grips with healthy food and nutrition issues. They not only defined their problem as lack of control over food (rather than inadequate knowledge about the Canada Food Guide), they defined their own Nutrition Project objectives (a community garden, community dinners, farm trips etc.) and worked together towards accomplishing them. Labonte quotes community organizer John McKnight: "Resources empower; services do not", because a resource is controlled by the person for whom it is intended, a service is something controlled by the provider (p.25).

Tarasuk and Maclean (1990), authors of a recent ethnographic study of food problems of low-income single mothers in a large Canadian city see nutrition education in an even larger context. Pervasive financial insecurity and its influence on decisions about expenditures on food, and the women's overall sense of impoverishment led the researchers to the conclusion that

the perception of a lack of immediate and tangible benefits of nutrition education programs discourages any potential involvement. In fact, they question the value of such programs:

> When the underlying causes of food problems are primarily structural, one has to question whether individualistic strategies such as food assistance and nutrition education are either efficacious or appropriate. Such interventions are incapable of promoting any significant, long-lasting improvements in the food situation of the poor, given the severe and chronic nature of the economic constraints which largely determine intake practices. Advocacy for structural changes, which will improve the economic situations of those now living in poverty, must be recognized as a primary responsibility of professional home economists, dietitians and nutritionists (p.82).

This view does not absolve the educator from her/his role, instead it adds another component. It requires an examination of one's personal philosophy, values and assumptions before engaging in any educational endeavour.

3. Characteristics of the Participatory Approach

Participatory programs are at present still in the minority, but interest in this approach is steadily growing among educators. One of the adult education fields in which some progress has been made is that of Participatory Literacy Education, reported by Fingeret and Jurmo (1989). While there may be a range of program practices there are some common characteristics of this approach that sets it apart from the traditional educational programs. Because these have direct applicability to nutrition education they are discussed here. Fingeret and Jurmo hold that in traditional programming skill development is central. It is the educator who knows the skill and the learner who needs the skill. Not only are learners separated from their knowledge in this process, a hierarchical relationship is formed and maintained. Even when information is solicited from students, the power is not shared but held by the educator. The authors maintain that such programs are designed to socialize students into a variety of roles in mainstream society and to meet the needs of those in power. "The emphasis is on training and treatment and adjusting rather than on consciousness-

raising, critical awareness, and the pursuit of political and social change" (Thompson in Fingeret, 1989, p.8). In a similar vein Fingeret criticizes competency-based adult literacy education:

> Theoretically, students can play a major role in defining the competencies that they want to achieve and the way in which they will do so. In practice, competency-based programs tend to judge adults' existing skills by a predefined list that reflects the activities deemed most necessary of those whose goal is to live among or be subservient to the middle class and to conduct their lives as the middle class thinks it is correct for them to conduct their lives (p.8).

This attitude is equally prevalent among the more traditional nutrition education programs in which the emphasis is on merely transmitting better coping skills for survival rather than providing skills to enable learners to take control of their lives.

In the participatory model power is shared equally among learners and staff. Learners have substantial amounts of control, responsibility and reward in decision making and operations. The students' knowledge, skills and experience are valued and respected and provide the foundation upon which further learning is built. For

this to come true educators and organizations have to change established power relationships, and this is often perceived as threatening. Ultimately then, participatory education is a philosophy as well as a set of practices, "based on the belief that learners--their characteristics, aspirations, backgrounds, and needs--should be at the center of...instruction" (Fingeret, 1989, p.5). This implies a collaborative relationship that allows students to define, create and maintain the program rather than just receive it. There is, however, often a reluctance on the part of the learner to fully engage in a shared process. This is not only due to inexperience with this process, but their "class status may have made it difficult for them to develop a belief in their own ability to participate in governance of formalized instruction" (Fingeret, 1989, p.13). They may feel bewildered or even momentarily threatened when asked to take on new responsibilities. The challenge for the educator then lies in becoming a facilitator of learning (Brookfield, 1986) who guides the learners to become more aware of the strengths they already have rather than an authority figure who knows and attempts to impart knowledge in the sequence and manner that he or she deems to be appropriate.

In making a case for participatory education in literacy

Jurmo (1989) concedes that the term learner participation elicits a multitude of responses. He suggests that these responses could be organized according to the amounts of control, reward, and responsibility given to the learner. What might emerge are several levels or steps with the lowest level at the bottom and the highest level at the top.

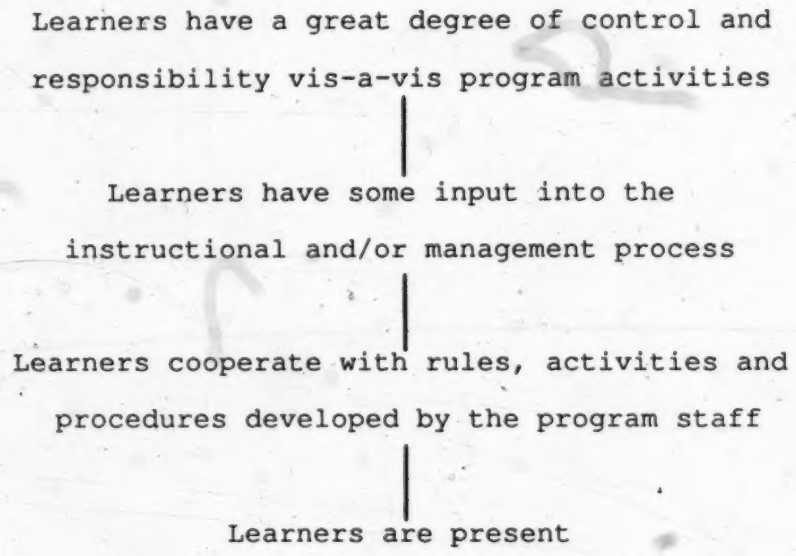
Learners have a great degree of control and responsibility vis-a-vis program activities
Learners have some input into the instructional and/or management process
Learners cooperate with rules, activities and procedures developed by the program staff
Learners are present

Figure 1. Levels of Learner Participation, adapted from Jurmo, 1989.

"It is these highest levels of learner participation for which advocates of participatory education generally aim....While it is impossible for all learners to be actively involved in all activities all the time,

maintaining a high average level of participation is the goal" (Jurmo, 1989, p.18). The author is fully aware of the constraints under which most educators have to work: demands for accountability, economic and political constraints, resentment from other segments of the educational field, reluctance by learners to take on new responsibilities and by practitioners to share them, and the need for a high level of commitment, yet he is confident that this approach represents "a more efficient, human and democratic form of education" (Jurmo, 1989, p.91).

Sharing this enthusiasm for the participatory approach, but in the nutrition field, is Michael Schwab, whose doctoral dissertation examines this approach and contrasts it with what he calls the mechanistic and ecological approaches. He describes the Mechanistic approach as one that "seeks to know about and treat people as relatively fixed phenomena whose lives are driven by causes" (p.5). He holds that this approach by-and-large represents the mainstream in behaviour-changing nutrition education.

The Ecological approach broadens the focus of the inquirer to include "relationships between structure and function, and their relationships with the world" (p.5), such as agricultural issues, economic programs, community

development etc., but it addresses human realities without reference to their experience.

The Participatory approach as a challenging ideal gives "primacy to knowing [people] more directly, from the inside as it were, by engaging with them in a form of active, mutual relationship"... It "calls for a close liaison between researcher and researched, planner and 'plannee', professional and client; a mutuality which is regarded as the optimal path" (p.6). Schwab holds that the exclusion of the human experience from the field of nutritional science has tended to lead to erroneous or misleading knowledge and inappropriate, ineffective programs.

Stephen Brookfield (in Mezirow, 1990) echoes this need for valuing peoples' experience in a slightly different context:

> This readiness to trust the credibility of one's own experiences is crucial to fostering critical reflection. Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School says that the most important thing that Highlander does is to help people know that their experiences have credibility and validity, that they are worth something...This sense of having the validity of one's perceptions confirmed, and of coming to trust the rightness of

> one's own instincts, is cumulative and powerful (p. 239).

Philosophers and humanists, psychologists and more recently educators have repeatedly endorsed the importance of human experience. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), for example, developed the idea that knowledge never relates simply to an external reality, but is always the product of a knowing subject, that it is experience filtered in the processes of perception (Schwab, p.238).

The concept of participatory education as applied in the field of community nutrition is based on the following assumptions: 1) every individual and community has unique qualities, aspirations and potentials, and unique understandings of their environment, all of which change over time; and 2) it is the purpose of education to develop these qualities and understandings through a process of mutual inquiry (Schwab, p.261). This view is in harmony with Freire's process of guided self-discovery or construction of knowledge. He states:

> The leaders bear the responsibility for coordination - and at times, direction - but leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis. By imposing their word on others, they falsify that word and establish a contradiction

between their methods and their objectives (Freire, 1968).

There is a strong link between Freire's concept of conscientization or consciousness-raising and the aims of participatory research. This approach assumes that there is a political nature to all we do and it requires of the educator/researcher to be clear about where they choose to stand regarding the daily struggles of oppressed people.

> Participatory research combines three activities: investigation, education, and action. It is a method of social investigation of problems, involving participation of oppressed and ordinary people in problem posing and solving. It is an educational process for the researcher and participants, who analyze the structural causes of named problems through collective discussion and interaction. Finally, it is a way for researcher and oppressed people to join in solidarity to take collective action, both short and long term, for radical social change (Maguire, 1987, p.35).

Not all community nutrition programs can or should aim for radical social change but should be nonetheless participatory in nature. This is the approach that has

been endorsed by the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) in their Alma Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care in 1978, and in 1983 as part of the report of a W.H.O. Expert Committee on New Approaches to Health Education:

> Experience has shown that paternalistic approaches and the imposition of decisions upon others are seldom effective....The modern concept is that the health education in this process is one in which the health care providers and the people teach each other, changing roles constantly. Far from merely seeking the cooperation of communities in carrying out plans already made, health education should encourage people to be actively involved... Many health professionals tend to encourage people to want what they themselves want, rather than attempting to understand the needs of the individuals and communities, and helping them to reach goals of their own choosing.

With such a strong endorsement one wonders why the participatory approach has been so difficult to adopt. Schwab cites the following obstacles: 1) the basic psychological stance of most health professionals, because the participatory approach "posits the dissolution of traditional barriers that protected professional researchers, planners and teachers from

having to listen to (and perhaps empathize with) their clients" (p.232); 2) the lack of charismatic leaders; 3) political and economic forces; 4) the self-limiting nature of cooperative ventures, which prevent them from being generalized (p.10). On the positive side Schwab refers to the following benefits: 1) this approach tends to lead to more appropriate solutions to local nutritional problems, i.e. more effective community programs; 2) it appears to provide a direct health benefit to those who participate. He states emphatically that we cannot afford the "cost of continuing to deny human experience" (p.334).

One of the most exciting examples of a participatory approach to nutrition education recently reported (Clark, 1990) is the Tototo Kilemba project in Kenya in which the learning objectives and intended outcomes were not determined or assumed by health professionals at the outset and imposed on the learners. Learners identified priorities with the help of their coordinators and thus set, were committed to the agenda. The project hypothesised that learning which addressed one's immediate objectives, reinforced one's sense of competence, and developed skills through collaborative activity, would benefit both individuals and community. Women in the program did make changes in their health and

nutrition behaviours not because they were told to, or given extensive lessons on food groups, they changed primarily because they had new access to needed resources, and because they saw a connection between a new practice and their own interests (Clark, 1990, p.58). Clark concludes that the "efforts of most individuals, regardless of status or nation, are concerned primarily with economics, maintenance, and quality of family life. People come to view and adopt certain practices and behaviours because they are consistent with these efforts" (p.57).

Clark (1990) provides a simple yet fitting summary of this chapter:

> Telling people to participate, or beckoning them to become part of a program, may be considered participation, but an understanding of the idea must be created before real participation can occur, fostering an atmosphere in which those participating feel they are partners in the event (p.127).

Observing, describing, analyzing and evaluating such an event is the purpose of this study. The next chapter will outline the methodology used for this purpose.

CHAPTER THREE

Studying the Participatory Approach

The purpose of this small case study was to ascertain the perceptions of participants as they engaged in a community-based nutrition program. The following questions guided the research. They deal with both process and outcome of a participatory approach to learning:

1) What are the most effective features and activities of the participatory education process?
2) What is the learners' level of satisfaction with the key features and activities of the participatory education process?
3) What characteristics of adult learners can be identified by the participatory education process?
4) What has been the learners' knowledge gain?
5) What changes in eating/shopping behaviours have occurred?
6) What is the learners' level of satisfaction with what they learned?

These questions are reflected in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 2. It explores possible reciprocal relationships between the learners' lived reality and expectations, the context of the learning process, the educator's philosophy, intents and restraints and the learning outcomes. The more congruent the three circles become the more likely the potential for satisfaction with the outcomes.

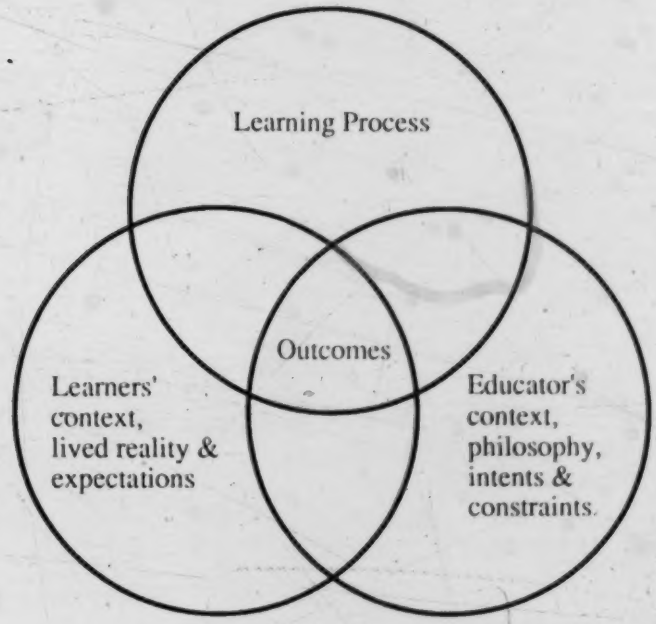

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the sources of the data for this study, address data collection techniques and describe the process of analysis.

1. Data Sources

Participants attending a community-based nutrition course offered by a Community College in the north-east section of the city were the primary source of data for this case study. Because of the anticipated small size of the group no provision was made for any sampling procedures. The convenience sample was based on self-selection, as participation in the workshop series and the study was voluntary.

Most of the women attending the program lived within walking distance of the Tenant Centre where the course was offered. They all fitted the definition of hard-to-reach adults, as they were either on social assistance or very low income; some were single parents, one woman had literacy problems, and another was a fairly recent immigrant to Canada. The group had been established to bring these women together with the objective of making

learning a joint experience, largely based on the participants' concerns and needs, as well as on their suggestions for learning activities and forms of evaluation. The study was conducted over a two months period with follow-up interviews five months later. These interviews provided the main set of data. While I had encouraged participant journal or log entries only one woman wrote some notes. Even though they were primarily content-based they provided a valuable debriefing tool after each session.

I, as educator-cum-researcher provided the second set of data through fieldnotes and journal entries. As I was combining the role of primary investigator and educator the issue of bias had to be addressed. The dual demands could be viewed as making it difficult at times to perceive certain problems or to avoid giving undue attention to certain aspects of the program that particularly appealed to me. However, some authors feel that the conflict between the roles has been exaggerated. Jorgenson (1989) makes this observation:

> There may be times and circumstances when it is difficult to concentrate full attention on participating while also observing...Accurate (objective and truthful) findings are <u>more</u> rather than less likely as the researcher becomes involved

> directly...with people in daily life. Objectivity suffers, when the researcher, due to a narrowing vantage point, fails to apprehend the meanings people attach to their existence (p.56).

It may also be argued that in this type of naturalistic inquiry the "insights gained when an involved, committed teacher is also the researcher are much richer and more useful, and likely to be used to improve practice" (Hammond, 1989). This requires that the researcher needs to be "analytically sharp...sensitive to interactions and, on top of that...theoretically sensitive" (Strauss in Merriam, 1989). It is also important to employ some strategies that will validate the data. Hammond's (1989) suggestions include "asking research participants to read and comment on research reports, having materials coded by other people and having one's research notes cross-checked". Coles and Grant (1985) state, "...the ultimate, single most important criterion [to establish validity of qualitative findings] must be whether those who have been the subject of the investigation feel that what is reported reflects the educational reality that they themselves experienced."

With specific reference to nutrition education Achterberg (1988a) sees research and practice as inseparable and stresses that the research process requires that

"nutritionists understand their learners' needs as learners" (p. 240). What better way to do this than finding out from the learners themselves how they experienced the learning process. Ideally we ought to move beyond proving the relevance of a program and instead explore "the complex question of the different types of learning that adults experience in the educational context of a program" (Dominice in Mezirow, 1990, p. 194).

Two of my colleagues provided additional data for this study. One attended the last session, the other had informal discussions and conversations with participants themselves or with their friends.

At the end of the nutrition program the Coordinator of the city's Food Policy Council interviewed me because of her interest of the participatory approach. Her notes constitute an unbiased angle and a useful cross reference.

2. Data Collection

Given the setting and context of this study the data collection techniques were qualitative in nature. This method of exploring peoples' meanings - how they

make sense of their lives and their experiences, how they structure their world, can only be captured through qualitative inquiry. "It provides a means of understanding the day-to-day reality of those we are studying, and procedures for the development of hypotheses" (Schwab, 1987, p.232). While there may difficulties associated with replication of qualitative studies at least one author (Kover in Dlabay, ACCI 34th Annual Conference Proceedings, 1988) suggests "that qualitative research may in fact possess greater objectivity than quantitative studies since participants are allowed to express their beliefs, attitudes, and insights on a topic rather than being limited to the parameters set by the researcher".

Several methods were used to address the research questions, as a combination of several techniques will likely balance the shortcoming of each technique used separately. The primary tools were participant interviews and observations.

Keen observation skills are an absolute requirement for a researcher in a qualitative inquiry. As I had no opportunity to conduct a pilot study but needed to hone my observation skills I spent part of an afternoon in a hospital day-room watching patients, taking brief notes

and expanding them afterwards, much in the same way I was going to do it for this study. While this experience was not extensive, it alerted me to the importance of immersing myself in the situation, attending to detail and careful notetaking.

Another opportunity for practising observation and note taking skills presented itself through a workshop with a group of native women. A feedback session with two of the participants proved most useful.

Observations in the context of this study were not limited to the group sessions but extended to the individual interviews to help create a more complete picture of the "lived reality" of the learners.

During the first and second sessions of the nutrition program we established a base of concerns, needs and key elements of the program and I informed participants of the intents of this study. Those women who consented to be part of the study were interviewed individually in their homes between the third and fourth sessions.

This first round of face-to-face interviews took between 1 1/2 and 2 hours. These meetings were time consuming because they served to a) explain the research intent more fully and b) to establish rapport and trust with the participants so they would be willing to describe their experiences from their point of view. In addition, these

contacts provided a check for consistency of responses with the group sessions and helped to ascertain a base line of expectations of the educational process as well as to determine current eating/shopping behaviour patterns.

The interviews were supplemented by a questionnaire, which in all cases but one, was filled out by the respondents themselves. In the case of the woman with limited reading skills I read the questions out to her, and at her request also marked the answers. I collected very few quantitative data because I felt that the very process of collecting them might disrupt the rapport and create distance. I taped all interviews except one, because it appeared to be too threatening. The brief notes taken during the interviews were later expanded. To preserve anonymity each interviewee chose a pseudonym. I marked all tapes and notes with those given names to ensure confidentiality. Of the eight women who had originally agreed to be part of the study I interviewed six after one refused to be interviewed and another did not keep the appointments we had made.

The second round of interviews lasted about 20 minutes each. They were done over the telephone one week after the series ended to give participants time to reflect on their satisfaction with the learning process and the

learning outcomes. By that time one of the women had moved out of the area, and repeated attempts to connect with her have failed.

The third and last round of interviews was designed to provide some information about the particpants' knowledge gain and potential behaviour changes five months after the end of the program. I expanded the number of questions to include one on reasons for behaviour changes, their own and others'. These follow-up interviews were again done over the telephone. This time they took up to 10 minutes each.

The learners readily gave permission to tape the program sessions two to six, but mechanical problems resulted in only four and a half useable tapes. I did not transcribe the tapes of the interviews or the sessions, but instead listened carefully to them, making notes, occasionally quoting verbatim, and concentrating to catch nuances of expressions along with content. These notes along with my own fieldnotes and journal entries form the backbone of the study. The pages of field notes and journal entries were simply dated and numbered for ease of reference, the pages of the interview notes were dated, numbered and colour-coded in order not to lose track of the origin of the comments during data analysis.

3. Instruments

As there were no suitable instruments available I developed a series of questions, both for the interviews and the questionnaire (see Appendix A & B). The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain a glimpse into current practices and behaviours of the learners and to provide a consistency check between these responses and those given during the interviews. In the questionnaire "What do you think?" questions 2,3,6,7,9,10 addressed common myths or beliefs about food, questions 1,4,5,8 provided indicators of learners' attitudes towards getting involved in a learning experience. Other parts of the questionnaire dealt with current practices, and the last part provided some demographic data.

The face-to-face interview questions were open-ended allowing for a semi-structured interview format. The questions not only dealt with the satisfaction with the knowledge gain itself but also with the process of gaining that knowledge. The interview questions merely formed a framework for the discussion, providing flexibility for elaborating and probing and a chance for unsolicited comments. The second and third set of interview questions arose partly out of questions which

had not previously been included and partly out of a need for further clarification. They were largely based on researcher journal entries.

Figure 3 provides a summary of the research schedule.

Question	Source	Technique	Timeline
Features Activities	Instructor/ Researcher	Logs Description	May/June
Satisfaction with process	Learners	Interviews	May/June
Characteristics	Instructor/ Researcher Learners	Logs Analysis Questionnaire	June/July
Knowledge Gain	Learners	Interviews Questionnaire	May/June November
Behaviour Change	Learners	Interviews	June/November
Satisfaction with outcome	Learners	Interviews	June

Figure 3 . Research Schedule - Summary

4. Data Analysis

The design of the data analysis was based on the interactive process of data analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1984) which includes data reduction, data display and conclusion-drawing/verification not only at the end but throughout the data collection phase. The initial phase of data reduction consisted of searching the fieldnotes and interview notes for data directly related to each of the research questions and recording them. These notes provided preliminary ideas for some clustering of patterns and themes. After selecting a number of themes I recorded relevant data from the interviews on cards by interview and page number of the original source. Using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory approach I continued searching for themes by sorting, grouping and regrouping of emerging patterns of meaning, adding categories, combining and rearranging them, and finally coding all responses and entries with numbered themes and subthemes. The colour-coded interview notes were separated and sorted according to the main themes and taped to large pieces of paper. Coded field notes were added for comparison and reflection.

The final stage in this content analysis led to a grouping of themes from two slightly different perspectives. The first is viewed as direct response to the six research questions which deal primarily with questions of features of the participatory process, with characteristics of the learners, and with learning and behavioural outcomes. These findings will be presented in narrative form in the following chapter and will include details of the setting, the participants and the process along with the evaluation of the experience from the learners' and the educator's points of view.

The second perspective is one of reflecting on the participatory approach, on the learners and on the role of the educator as perceived by the participants and the facilitator. These reflections form the basis for Chapter Five.

I followed Coles and Grant's recommendation (see page 38) and asked two of the participants, Sam and Jane, to read Chapter Five and give me feedback as to the accuracy of my perceptions of the workshop series. They suggested some minor additions and commented that I had indeed captured the essence of the experience and had "covered all aspects of the group".

The methodology chosen for this study reflects the belief

that the meaning learners make of their lives and their participation in a learning process are best captured through qualitative data. Keen observation of and careful listening to the learners make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the effectiveness of the participatory approach to learning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Describing the Participatory Approach

1. The Planning Process

The idea for this community-based nutrition course arose as a result of a workshop series held in the spring of 1989 at a Community Centre located in one of the most economically depressed areas, the north-east end of the city. Group members had subsequently put together a small booklet of dollar saving tips and recipes to share with friends and neighbours. I had stayed in touch with Sam, the woman who had taken on major responsibility for this publication. Together we had hoped to organize a small group of women in order to discuss some of the food and nutrition issues further.

Actual planning for the Spring 1990 sessions started in January of that year with the initial plan to have meetings at Sam's house. Relationship and security problems did not allow for this, so the search for a meeting place was on. As a result of several planning

meetings with Sam and her neighbour Rose over a cup of tea in Sam's kitchen we decided to start an independent community group, unconnected to the nearby Community Centre, which was perceived as a potential rival group. The series would run on six consecutive Wednesday mornings for 1 1/2 hours each. Very quickly the need for childcare became a major issue, but the local Community College provided funding and hired a qualified childcare worker. In addition, the College let us use their toys and funded snacks for the children and coffee for the parents. Space at no cost was made available by a local Church at a Tenant Centre, and one of the women connected with the church volunteered to help with the childcare. It was at this point that I introduced the research component into the planning process, and the decision was made to study the effectiveness of the participatory approach to nutrition education in this potentially very small community group. Sam and Rose seemed quite excited about this new aspect, but for me began the difficult task of taking on the combined roles of participant, instructor and researcher.

In keeping with the principles of joint decision making by the group in establishing learning needs and format, no specific topics were chosen, which posed a major difficulty in advertising. While Sam would have liked a

series related to dieting concerns she was willing to wait for the group to make that decision. But we agreed on the following criteria for the sessions: the program would deal with food/nutrition issues and had to be relevant, up-to-date, interesting, fun, not costly, and most of all give participants an increased sense of self-worth. Sam would likely gain a lot from her involvement, as she would be very willing to share her expertise with others. "I've been there, I can relate better [than professionals], not just give advice" (Journal entry March 12, 1990). More specifically, we hoped and expected the following:

1. That participants would become more skilled as consumers, but at the same time also more critically aware of the broader context of consumer issues;
2. That learners would experience an increased sense of control over their food choices;
3. That participants would share their expertise with each other;
4. That learners would participate in shaping the program according to their needs and take on responsibility for their learning; and
5. That an evaluation of the participatory approach by the group members themselves would contribute to a better understanding of this strategy aimed at reaching hard-to-

reach adults.

These initial intents were very general, and were "regarded as a starting place for dialogue rather than as a set of absolute ends to be sought, as desirable as the intents may seem to be" (Sauvé, 1987, p.36).

2. Advertising

After four months of planning we were ready to advertise the program. A community health nurse and a social worker received flyers and information via telephone so they might invite their clients. The same flyers were distributed through the Community Centre and the two schools in the immediate neighbourhood of the Tenant Centre. One person phoned to inquire about the program but no one came as a result of the flyers; only one person came upon recommendation of the social worker. The two women the health nurse had invited did not attend. They made many excuses for not coming when contacted by phone. All the other women came as a result of word of mouth. Attendance fluctuated between a low of three women on the first day to ten on the second, and then stabilized around six.

3. The Setting

The Tenant Centre is a housing unit located in a subsidized housing complex. Only a small sign above the front door indicates that this is not a private home. Vandals have ripped off the screen door and tampered with the mail box. The view from the dreary living room window is directly on to a huge garbage container located in the parking lot. The windows were bolted shut.

The children met upstairs in an uncarpeted room. This contributed to a fair amount of noise. This noise was, however, less distracting than repeated door-bell-ringing by some neighbourhood children.

The mothers sat on metal chairs around a heavy wooden table in the living room. Six to eight fitted just comfortably around the table. When ten women attended the room felt uncomfortably crowded. The walls were bare and in dire need of painting. Only a few decorations, made by the children who had attended a Childrens' Club there, were still intact. A desk and several wooden boxes with craft supplies formed the remaining furnishings. Any equipment required for cooking or sampling had to be brought in.

While the centre was not an ideal environment, it was

certainly non-threatening for people who might have reservations about a school-like atmosphere. And it was close. The women could walk with their strollers to the centre in a short time.

4. The People - Participant Profiles

Of the ten women who attended one or more workshops six stayed with the group and were willing to be interviewed. One of the other women moved out of the area, another had agreed to be interviewed, but did not respond to repeated attempts to contact her. The remaining two women did not stay with the group, saying they had only come because their friends had "dragged them there" or they had been "curious to find out what was going on", but had had no intention of becoming part of the group.

The women who became "the group" were relatively young, all in their twenties or early thirties. The children's ages ranged from 11 months to 10 years, with the average age of about two years. Two women had children of eight and ten years. Four of the women were married, one to a reformed alcoholic, who had been married before; the other two were either separated or divorced.

They all fitted the definition of hard-to-reach learners,

half the group received social allowance, the rest were on very low incomes, one of the women had only completed Junior High School and was struggling with reading and writing, another was a new Canadian, but with quite good English skills. For most of the women everyday reading and writing needs did not present any problems, though comprehension of more abstract materials caused confusion and occasionally required clarification. It was interesting to note that half the women were overweight, a phenomenon quite common among low-income people. But more disconcerting than the weight problem was the health status of the children. Five of the nine children seemed to have a major health problem. This places quite a strain on the families who can least afford it, and often disrupts plans of the mothers who might want to attend courses such as this one.

The following section describes the women who participated in the workshops and volunteered to be part of this study. Their lives and stories seem to be similar to those of many others living in the same neighbourhood, each having a unique set of needs, yet sharing the same social and financial constraints. These often contribute to a certain amount of fear of the unknown, some are even afraid of venturing out of their

homes. They may be afraid that participation in a group might expose their weaknesses to others or add to the long lists of resented "shoulds".

Betty

Betty, her husband and three-year-old daughter live in an older, well-maintained house, too far away from the Tenant Centre to walk there. In fact, she was the only participant who had access to a car and a babysitter (her mother-in-law). She had brought her daughter to one of the early sessions, but T. refused to join the other children and clung to her mother throughout the morning. After that Betty came without her.

Betty had found out about the course through a Social worker and attended the first session along with two other women. This turned out to be her favourite session. Betty is soft-spoken and almost as shy as her daughter. She had never attended a nutrition course before but felt very comfortable in the small, intimate setting that promised to cater to her needs. While Betty did not come from the immediate neighbourhood, did not know anybody in the group and dressed less casually than the others, she was well accepted by the group. Her reading and writing skills were higher than those of some of the other group members, but she patiently accepted a

pace of presentation that was sometimes slower than optimal for her.

The interview session at her house lasted close to 1 1/2 hours, as she needed a fair amount of clarification, possibly due to lack of concentration, as we were repeatedly interrupted by her daughter's attempts to get our attention, first through screaming, then through demanding a sandwich, a drink, and finally toast with honey. When the honey container dropped on the floor Betty almost gave up in despair and embarrassment - but we carried on.

Betty had felt extremely intimidated by the large group at the second session and stated that a group that size (ten) does not allow for enough individual participation. She hinted that people like her need to be given a chance to talk by asking simple questions to break the ice without being put on the spot. She suggested that this would be easier in a small group.

Betty is probably the most adventurous cook in the group. One day she brought in hummus and pita bread for the group to sample. She also shared a recipe for a rather unusual salad. She had requested the recipe from the restaurant where she had eaten the salad. This sharing seemed to indicate that she had built up a level of confidence within the group and within herself. She

admitted to a certain amount of confusion at the beginning, but she very quickly became comfortable in contributing her ideas in her quiet way. Betty liked to watch and listen initially, was reluctant to put forth her ideas and was looking for expert opinions, but as her experience with groups increases she will likely take more initiative and become willing to take on a more active role.

Betty completed the series with very positive feelings. She had already shared a lot of her learning with family members, tried new foods, experimented with bean cookery and become a more critical reader of the local newspaper. In fact, she had discovered an error and took some trouble checking the information out against the notes she had taken in the workshop. She would like to continue attending sessions but predicted she might not have the time to devote to a more formal program as she was expecting another baby in the fall.

Sam

Sam is divorced and lives with her two children and a cat in a high-density townhouse unit in an area that is very depressing to drive into. My journal entry after the first visit to Sam's house describes the area as "bleak, ghetto-like, with no breathing space" (Feb.14, 1990). She

has been trying hard to grow a small bush by her front door, but the children keep walking on it. The little patch that could be a rock garden has become a place for the Blue Box and the garbage bags. All along the row of housing units it is the same, rocks and garbage. There is a little patch of grass at the back of the house and a small area for the children to play. The housing units are not well kept up. The screen of the front door has been missing for months. Water stains in the kitchen have not been repaired either. Yet rents are scheduled to go up by mid-summer, carving another section out of the food dollar or forcing people to move.

We sat in Sam's kitchen for the interview, drinking a cup of generic tea and trying to ignore the increasingly noisy attention-getting behaviour of her five-year-old son. As the older daughter came home for lunch she was initially intrigued with the taperecording procedure, but soon copied her brother's demanding style for food. Sam gave in and served them french fries with huge amounts of ketchup. Upon protest of her children she changed the plates she had served the food on, simply to have peace. Sam was embarrassed, but did not exhibit a consistent parenting style then or in any of the planning meetings. Her life is so stressful, there seems to be no energy left for parenting. Yet Sam was instrumental in getting

this project off the ground. She mentioned repeatedly that she needed to get her mind off her problems and do something else, simply to remain sane.

Sam was pleased to show me some of her handicrafts, she even demonstrated some crocheting and quilting. The quality of her work is remarkable.

One of Sam's passions is to collect recipes and food and nutrition information. All is neatly stored in a series of three-ring binders. She had just completed some individual nutrition counselling sessions with a nursing student, and she felt that some of the information she had received might be useful for the rest of the group. In fact, she had become more aware of her food habits and had made some changes in her home that she felt were worth sharing. We decided to give her an opportunity to relate some of her experiences with change, and I was amazed at the ease with which she simply told what she had done and encouraged others to try it too. She really needed a boost for her ego, a confirmation she had done something right, although she stressed that she was often still very confused and had a lot to learn. But Sam is always willing to try something new, if it promises to be acceptable to her children, is "good for them", and if it is likely to shave a few dollars off the food bill.

Money came up in almost all interviews, simply because it

is a major worry. However, Sam felt that it is important to do something for the community on a volunteer basis. "All people care about is a paycheque" she said with reference to some women who, according to her, work for the community not because they care but because they get paid. "Money talks, they say", was her comment.

Because Sam likes collecting recipes and pamphlets she was disappointed that so few women had brought any of these to the meetings to share. She suggested forming a small group in the future to compile a collection of such materials.

Sam played a key role in these workshops, in planning, in daily routines as well as in an ongoing evaluation. Her sense of power and ownership was briefly threatened when the group became large and one or two people she knew appeared to have the potential of taking over. This was her group, she had no intention of letting that slip away from her. She too, like Betty, felt that an ideal group size would be around five or six people, large enough for a variety of opinions, small enough for everyone to participate. She was very accommodating when the group established a learning agenda and negotiated well. Her thirst for knowledge allowed her to find new information even in topics that may not have been her first choice. At some point in her life Sam would like to pursue some

food-related training program. In the meantime she is absorbing as much as she can in any way she can.

Rose.

A seemingly endless row of garbage bags, Blue Boxes, rocks and weeds formed a receiving line as one entered Rose's townhouse unit. The carport was filled with an old gutted car and many car parts destined for sale. I was invited to join the ongoing morning coffee klatsch with husband J. and two women from the neighbourhood. I introduced myself and listened to some chit chat until the women left. It would have been too intimidating for Rose to tape this interview, so I took notes and reconstructed the discussion afterwards.

Rose, in her early thirties, looks old for her age. She is very shy and sensitive and almost afraid of her own voice. Her husband hovered over her and tended to answer for her. In a strange way the setting was almost idyllic: Rose's husband J. leaning against the open window, joined by their purring cat; J.'s blue cigarette smoke curling up and drifting out, and our discussion being interrupted by J.'s occasional calls to people below and negotiations for "good deals" being made on the spot. J. has been finding some incredible treasures in the neighbourhood garbage containers. Profit from the

sale of these finds supplements their meagre income. Money quickly became a major topic again, and both Rose and her husband felt that too many people in their neighbourhood would only do things if they received a monetary benefit. Hence, they suggested, some of the women had come to the nutrition workshops hoping thy might get some free breakfasts.

J. is a reformed alcoholic with a passion for chuckwagon racing. I had to listen to many of his successful and less successful endeavours and then go through their photo album, starting with rather poorly taken wedding pictures. I then had to admire the wedding cake decorated with 150-year-old wine glasses. J. was vague about his previous marriage or marriages, but both he and Rose were happy to have stayed together thus far, against all predictions to the contrary. They told very proudly of their accomplishments: no alcohol or bingo, instead they managed to arrange their finances in such a way that they had a credit rating and had bought a large TV and more recently a microwave oven, quite a contrast to the peeling paint on the wall and ripped kitchen chairs we sat on. Both Rose and J. have some literacy problems. Their two boys are in a special education program. J. has had some experience with cooking and appears to be a shrewd shopper. In what appeared to be a somewhat

condescending way he said he had been "teaching her a few things to cook". He seemed very protective of Rose and indicated that it was really good for her to come out to these classes. When her husband left for a few minutes to strike another deal Rose did quite well answering the questions herself. I was concerned about her understanding of some of the questionnaire items, which I had to read out and paraphrase. By her standards her family was eating quite a nutritious diet. This did not seem to be confirmed by some examples of food choices given earlier. So what was she getting out of the sessions? For Rose it was not so much the information, but a chance to be with other women, to be able to give her opinions and to be accepted. Her husband really wanted her to go to the workshops. He would like the group to continue because "Rose likes going, and she picks up a lot". Rose was indeed committed to the group, she even lent us her coffeemaker, and while she may not have been one of the fast learners or an organizer her role in the group serves as a reminder to question one's assumptions about learning.

Jane

After having admired the family pets, some photos and a quilt Jane had recently made we settled down for the

interview at the kitchen table. The townhouse unit is tiny, and it seemed there was very little room for anything. Toys, papers, books and an alarming array of medicine bottles caught my attention. Jane's one-and-a-half-year-old son has a congenital health problem and keeps her and her husband busy and worried. While they get some support to help them out with their extra financial commitments money is tight. Both Jane and her husband are overweight and they both have a fairly serious serum cholesterol problem. In fact, they had attended some counselling sessions on diet modification, and they are quite informed, but they had not really put much of the advice into practice. They would like to have several more children, and this, she thinks, may be an incentive to change their diet and to lose some weight. Jane is quite active in the local Community Centre, which provides a much needed support system for her and others like her. While some small earnings provide an incentive she feels that learning a craft, for instance, and then teaching it to someone else raises her self-esteem. During the interview Jane described the poverty cycle which keeps people isolated, because they have no money, no car, but usually several children. This forces them to stay at home, which in turn makes "you feel bad about yourself". Getting a job and going

off welfare is not an attractive solution, because the minimum wage is too low to exist on. In fact, welfare provides a sense of security that is hard to give up. "It's scary to go out there, work for 40 hours and then 100 hours at home, just for an extra 100 dollars, there is no point. The government has to come up with a better incentive than that!"

Jane was one of the more verbal members of the nutrition group and particularly eager to learn about the use of legumes. Having tasted some dishes at the workshops, she then made them at home. She is now beginning to incorporate them on and off in their family meal patterns. As Jane is looking for specific information she would like to see a mix of lecture and discussion, provided there is enough attention given to the questions of the group members. She suggested this might be difficult if the group size exceeds five or six people, "because the more you participate the more you get out of it".

Helen

Helen is trying to grow a variety of exotic vegetables in her postage-stamp-sized backyard of her townhouse. As a new Canadian Helen still prepares primarily traditional ethnic foods for her family, her husband and two

preschool daughters. She is pregnant and would actually like to have a larger family.

Helen has a surprisingly positive attitude. "Life isn't fair", she said, but quickly added: "We need to be thankful for every day, it doesn't make sense to grumble and complain all the time. We need to make the most of the situation and push forward." She, too, got involved in the local Community Centre and began starting to retrain as accountant, on a part-time basis. She tells people: "You may need a push, because Government won't be there for you all the time. Don't depend on others, but on yourself". And she follows her own advice. She proceeded to describe people in her neighbourhood as "very, very isolated" and unwilling to come out of their house unless they get paid to do so. "People don't want to come and sit down and discuss, they want to go to the Mall and sit down and smoke. So you should advertise a session with free donuts, and muffins, and the place will be packed." This may sound judgmental, but Helen believes firmly that people have to do things for themselves, make use of available sources of information, such as this course, and begin to realize their hidden talents and use them.

It was refreshing to talk to Helen and learn something about her foods and customs and watch her quiet way of

dealing with her children. A big bowl of fruit seemed to indicate an effort to provide good nutrition for her children. Her excitement in learning about new foods and her willingness to experiment with them were further evidence of that effort. (She even tried a yogurt shake on the children and reported that they liked it.) Helen brought a valuable perspective to the group. Humour, eagerness, openness, friendliness and enthusiasm, these characteristics made Helen a group member every one could easily relate to.

Fran

Security was the major reason for Fran's choice of apartment. Unfortunately another rent increase will force her to move shortly. Fran's one-year-old daughter was quietly playing on the floor while I was listening to some moving personal stories. Fran, a single mother, was quite articulate and outspoken and seemed to have good insights into the neighbourhood problems. Discussion very quickly turned once again to welfare issues and the barriers she had encountered in trying to move out of the poverty cycle. She had started a nursing course before she had had the baby. She would like to take up studying again, provided her health will hold out and she can get some financial help. A number of nursing textbooks on

the kitchen table seemed to be evidence of her desire to review some of the material. But she is totally disenchanted with the "system" due to a series of frustrating experiences. She had been told not to bother going back to school, because she probably "wouldn't make it anyway". In spite of all that she thinks she will be successful. "S.'s sister made it with three kids, I should make it with one." She only wished other people would take some initiative in this part of the city and not just complain. "You'd think if you are on Social services and aren't doing anything all day you might be happy to become involved in something."

Fran was quite interested in the workshop series as she had little background in food or nutrition other than an awareness around some allergy issues. Her baby has problems with the digestion of milk, and Fran has an allergy to MSG. This has caused her to become a more careful label reader than the other group members.

Fran felt that for low income people the experience of actually cooking and tasting new foods would be high on the list of priorities, because "food seems to attract people. People want to try it before they buy it, they can't afford to waste any money." While Fran thinks word of mouth would attract more people to a nutrition program than flyers, she is also painfully aware of the fact that

"people's lives in this community are in such a shamble (sic) that they tend to live from day to day. Even though they may want to attend workshops other things dominate."

During the interview Fran asked a lot of questions about this study. She had noticed that the educational approach had been different, but she really liked it, because it gave the group a chance to decide what the topics were going to be, and an opportunity to ask questions and exchange ideas. While one course "will not give you all the information you want, at least you have some referral numbers if you want to pursue a topic". For Fran's sake it was good to have a few more experienced women in the group who could pass on both tips and encouragement.

Renate

I had grown up, studied and taught in Europe before coming to this city many years ago. While raising a family I completed a degree in Family Studies. My interest in adult education led me to my current work in the area of consumer education at a Community College. Having a very taste-tolerant family I have many opportunities to try new recipes and foods. So it was almost natural to be assigned the role of "experimenter"

in this group in addition to the more official one of facilitator and researcher. Being accepted by the women as a group member with certain skills rather than being seen as a formal educator confirmed my conviction that learning is a shared experience.

5. The Process - A Summary

Week 1

I knew I had taken a programming risk when I introduced the series of workshops on food to the three women attending the first of the six planned sessions. In contrast to a traditional program plan with carefully phrased objectives by the instructor and predetermined content, activities and outcomes for a tightly scheduled program, the participatory approach relies on the group members to do the planning and to give direction. The facilitator becomes a partner and co-learner. In practice that meant that the group members generated a long list of pressing concerns and questions around the topics of food and nutrition. They ranged from learning basic skills to questions on trendy topics such as fibre, fat and cholesterol. They represented a good blend of a need for immediately relevant information with a

curiosity for the more popular topics frequently discussed in the media. Subsequently they combined, rearranged and numbered the issues in order of importance to them and reached consensus on the topic for the following week. No time slots were assigned in order to build in sufficient flexibility. We next tried to generate suggestions for appropriate learning activities. This proved much more difficult. While the women were quite clear on what they wanted to learn they initially had difficulty in pinpointing how they wanted to learn or how they were going to evaluate their learning.

I had prepared some backup questions and activities for this session in the event that the participants would be hesitant to generate their own ideas. None of these activities were used as getting acquainted and brainstorming took up all the available time. To help us get acquainted we talked about favourite foods as well as disliked foods, a nonthreatening discussion that allowed us to go beyond the naming of the food and try to understand what factors might have contributed to those food patterns. Most women connected them to some childhood experience, a discovery they had not really thought about before.

Week 2

This session necessitated a move from the kitchen to the living room to accommodate 11 people. Responses to the question of why they had chosen to come made it clear that several women were only there because they had been "dragged" along by their friends, or because they wanted to know what that new program was all about.

Their main reasons for coming, though, were very practical. They wanted to learn "how to shop better, especially for the kids' sake", "how to cook different things", "how to eat healthier", they wanted to discover "new ways of cooking hamburger", "how to use more beans", "how to go back to basics", " how to choose and store fruit and vegetables", "what to do with overripe fruit". For some it also meant a welcome break and a chance to get away from the kids and the housework and at the same time an opportunity to be exposed to sharing of new information.

Because of the new group composition we had to renegotiate the proposed list of topics. With minor modifications and a few additions the list was quickly accepted.

The topic chosen for the day was "Breakfasts". The discussion started with a listing of problems as experienced by the participants. This led to a sharing

of tips and ideas on how to enhance that meal. A hands-on segment followed in which we examined examples of actual cereal boxes as to packaging design, cost and nutrition labelling. We compared ingredients, such as sugar, fat, protein and fibre content and then developed jointly guidelines for the choice of nutritious cereals. We finally did a cost comparison of several types and brands of cereals, based on a per 100 gram unit. The women were amazed at the price and quality differences. The participants were then invited to sample a home-made breakfast cereal I had brought. They voiced some strong reactions both for and against it.

Week 3

Rose brought a friend to session three, but the number of women attending had dropped to six, much to the relief of everyone, it seemed. I mentioned the study again, but it had already become a non-issue; they wanted to get on with the session. Discussion initially centred around more breakfast ideas. We generated a long list of options and shared ways of encouraging children to eat nutritious breakfasts.

When I checked on events of the week I discovered that on their shopping trips during the week they had already applied what they had learned about unit pricing. But

they asked for more detailed information. In fact, there were lots of questions, though often rather tangential for someone used to a tight lesson plan. There seemed to be such a need to talk, question and discuss, that though we had set out to address weight issues there was no time but to set the agenda for the following week. Muffins I had brought were a hit, confirming my intuition that tasting had to become an element of the program.

Week 4

Everyone had arrived well ahead of time. After a brief question period and agreement on the agenda for the day we started a discussion on "Fats" based on the questions the participants had raised. Their questions formed the outline for the morning and the basis for evaluation at the end. Everyone had become so involved that nobody noticed we had not taken a break. In fact, we hardly ever did.

The topic of bean cookery as a means to save money and improve nutrition had been raised previously. To conclude the morning we took time to taste some refried beans and a garbanzo bean salad, firsts for all of the women there.

Week 5

The women arrived early again and got right into discussing recipes. They reported that they had shared their new learnings with friends and family, had tried new recipes and were eager to try more. They got a chance to taste something new again, because I cooked several kinds of rice and made a meatless chili, which they said they really enjoyed. The saying "A taste is worth a thousand words" certainly proved to be true with this group.

Identification of grain and bean samples took centre stage, interspersed with some information on protein complementarity and the nutritional value of beans.

The most exciting information for the group seemed to be a "cost per serving chart" for various protein sources which we filled in together.

Sam took quite an active role that day, distributing handouts, encouraging people to complete the favourite foods poster and sharing her experience in making diet changes.

This informal session, primarily in question and answer format, resulted in several requests from members of the nearby Community Centre for copies of the written materials of the session. The participants were obviously doing some sharing in the community.

Week 6

On my agenda for the day was a group evaluation of the series, but that was not to be. The group did not allow time for this activity. Maybe the women felt no need for a formal evaluation since they had had many an opportunity to challenge the program if they were not satisfied.

The women spent considerable time and energy on a taste test of peaches and on discussing some common food myths. More and more questions arose as we were trying to wrap up. It seemed they were afraid that time was running out before they could get all their questions answered.

A colleague, who sat in as observer of this last session was well accepted by the group and participated in the discussion.

On this last day Helen became the spokesperson for the group, thanking me for facilitating the course and the babysitters for their excellent support. The women left expressing hope that the group would continue in some form in the fall; they wanted to learn much more.

6. The Insights

Before discussing the findings from a broader perspective I will present highlights of the data in relation to the six research questions. The report is based on interviews, observations and on a brief questionnaire. While the big issues are similar for all the women the heterogenous nature of the individual needs of the participants in the study is reflected in their diverse response patterns. A larger sample would most likely confirm some of the responses and indicate trends in the hard-to-reach population as a whole more clearly.
For the six women who agreed to be part of the study instability and change were the most predictable characteristics which make follow-up research and programming difficult. By fall, the time we had scheduled for the last round of interviews, many things had changed for the participants. Two of the women had had babies, one had taken on a part-time job, another was in the process of moving back to Africa, one had moved out of the community, broken off all contacts and possibly for security reasons gone into hiding. Considering those ups and downs in people's lives in addition to their children's many health problems the

attendance at the workshops was actually impressive, with two of the core group attending all six sessions, and the remaining core group members attending between three to five. This seems to indicate a high level of commitment and satisfaction which is borne out by their 4.39 rating of the program on a five-point scale.

Results of the questionnaire.

With one exception the women responded to the questionnaire individually and without prompting. The section What do you think? (see Appendix A) does not yield many surprises, because the number of respondents is so small. However, it is fairly evident that there is a lot of confusion among consumers with regard to "healthy" or "adequate" eating practices. While they agreed, some of them strongly, that there are too many additives in food, and that it might be healthier to eat less red meat, they were divided on issues such as the importance of vitamin supplementation, or time and cost involved in nutritious meal preparation. All, except one, felt that meal planning was a difficult task. Answers to further questions in the same set revealed a strong support for increased knowledge about nutrition because of its importance, primarily for the sake of

their children. At the same time they admitted confusion, even on the issue of understanding and interpreting food labels.

When questioned on the sources for nutrition information, the respondents placed pamphlets and other reading materials surprisingly high on the list along with talks on food related topics. However, the lower their reading skills the more they indicated that friends, family members or the TV provided useful guidance. Newspapers and magazines rated very low as probably most of the women cannot afford to buy them. No one mentioned school newsletters as a source, and only half the group consulted doctors or nurses for information.

The set of questions What do you do? centred around shopping and eating habits and behaviours. Because of the proximity of two different grocery store chains most shopped at both locations. One person reported shopping daily, another two or three times a week, the rest on a weekly or even less frequent basis. As one might expect the frequency of shopping as well as the choice of store depended on the availability of a car. Most women had to walk to the store. Eating out was part of a daily or weekly routine for about one third of the respondents. In the event that they ran out of food they turned to

family or friends, possibly to the food bank, but not to their social worker.

Questions around meal planning and preparation revealed that most of the women never planned their meals, but they claimed they made a shopping list. However, they reported that they did not stick to their list consistently nor did they always record their food expenditures. Label reading, while attempted from time to time, was perceived as too confusing to be useful. Mothers did not necessarily enjoy cooking, and they tended to get little help from children. All the children supposedly ate breakfast, even the "picky eaters"; the mothers themselves did less well on that question.

Low-sugar snacks and whole grain cereals were not part of a regular meal pattern, yet most women thought their families were eating a healthy diet. There is obviously little consensus of what constitutes a "healthy diet", but the women probably responded given their current level of understanding. Most women indicated during the classes that they felt they needed to make several changes to improve their way of eating. They also felt that they had the ability to make such changes in the future.

The results of this small survey contributed to a better

understanding of the participants. While many of the responses to the questions may have been somewhat predictable I felt I needed to hear the answers and experiences from the women themselves rather than basing my information on general studies about low-income people.

Data from interviews and observations.

Returning to the questions that provided a framework for this study I will summarize the data most applicable for answering each one.

1) **What are the most effective features and activities of the participatory education process?**

This community food and nutrition program was not planned in the isolation of an office and subsequently "delivered" to the "target audience". These are terms used in the majority of program planning procedures but would not fit the purpose of a participatory approach. I felt someone from the community had to be involved in the planning and in the running of the day-to-day activities.

I was fortunate to link with Sam, a woman who was willing to devote time to the planning process and able to keep me grounded in the reality of the potential group. She also took care of a number of essential tasks, from making coffee to cleaning up, from distributing handouts to debriefing after the sessions. Sam was an invaluable asset to the program as she was the source of some essential practical experience.

Brainstorming for food related concerns and issues proved to be a very helpful part in planning topics for the following weeks. Although the initial group was small, the women articulated issues which were equally relevant to group members who joined later. This list of potential topics for discussion became the focal point at the beginning of each session as we adjusted it, dropped some topics, added new ones or rearranged the order of priority. It was definitely the participants' list, not mine. It thus reflected the learners' needs, not my perception of their needs. This approach gave flexibility to the program and allowed changes in midstream. It became quite apparent that we had to incorporate more food sampling and food preparation, if the program was to be at all useful.

The hands-on experiences with real products and real foods which the women, if encouraged, were likely to use

in the future, became the most popular segment of the program. Theory must be translated into foods that appeal to the women. If they like them, chances are they will persuade their families to adopt the new foods.

Even though the group was on occasion hesitant to stop and take stock, reflection was an invaluable feature of the program, because it allowed participants to affect change if they so wished, and it enabled the facilitator to respond. The process thus became one of collaboration with the learners, truly sharing in the responsibility for the success of the process. This seemed somewhat overwhelming to some of the learners initially as they had always experienced education from the top down, but they soon began to appreciate the opportunity to indicate whether their needs were being met. This process is time consuming but well worth it.

Allowing time for participants to talk, deal with their frustrations, fears and problems of the past week were a critical component of the program. It removed some of the emotional baggage and in turn paved the way for learning to take place. An opportunity to share their personal experience, starting from their own reality, is probably the single most important feature of this educational approach. The women appeared to have an

insatiable need to exchange ideas, to ask questions, to be heard, and to have their actions confirmed by their peers.

2) **What is the learners' level of satisfaction with the key features and activities of the participatory approach?**

Being involved in program planning and joint decision making, though initially novel, "felt good", they reported, because then we "talk about things that we want to talk about. We all have issues, and everybody can take part in talking about their concern, everyone can learn something". "This way we learn from each other; you pick up ideas from others". And this seemed to make learning "fun". I became intrigued with the concept of fun and asked everyone what that meant. They explained:
"when I'm getting something out of it",
"being involved",
"everyone participating and contributing",
"when we do taste tests watching each other's facial expression",
"when everyone gets along",
"when you've learned something, and when you've

communicated with others",
"when you can be open and talking",
"everyone putting in their opinion, sharing information",
"when you learned a lot",
"interacting with people in a group".

While the need for content definitely existed, the desire for a chance to talk, to share and to exchange ideas was as high, if not higher. "You learn from each other", " you pick up ideas from each other" was repeated time and time again. For the shyer members of the group it was sometimes difficult to get a chance to get their turn, but they said they felt comfortable in saying what they had to say without fear of being judged. This does not mean the group did not have to grapple with certain dynamics that can make or break a group. However, the women indicated that the small size of this group was one of the keys to the success of the group and ideal for this type of educational approach. Having experienced attendance from three to ten everyone felt that the magic number of participants was six, because only then could they all get an opportunity to truly participate, feel accepted and not be "shortchanged". The larger membership, they felt, slowed the group down and resulted in "you [facilitator] having to teach too much".

The need for practical, immediately useful information

coupled with hands-on experiences was stressed repeatedly. "I don't like just sitting there taking it all in...the more you participate the more information you get" (Jane, Interview June 8). "When you participate you gain, you put in your opinions and other people put in theirs" (Helen, Interview June 7) The follow-up interviews clearly indicated that the practical sections of the program were the ones everyone remembered the best and followed up on the most.

Meeting other women and being in a compatible learning group met some peoples' needs but did not entirely satisfy some women. They were struggling with their need for somewhat more structure, such as a more traditional program might provide. They felt most comfortable in those sections of the program where we "covered" a certain amount of content, where we "accomplished" something. When questioned the women had no trouble identifying their preferred learning style. One or two needed to listen and watch first while others had a need for very concrete hands-on experiences. This clarification on their part served as a reminder for me to incorporate more variety to accommodate the various learners.

The women recognized my attempt at getting away from the traditional teaching role, and they seemed to appreciate

it: "You didn't come across like a boss, because you were asking questions, we were all talking".

"Everybody should be in charge, the facilitator has some information, but if someone is in charge in the group, that means someone is ruling, there is a boss among us, that's not good. If we're all in charge, we have freedom of expression in saying our opinion."

I was perceived as a guide, planner, coordinator, sometimes as expert who could "teach theory". But when it came to the practice they were the experts; they knew how to cope and how to survive, and they could teach each other. So there was a fair amount of give and take. The participants definitely knew what they wanted to learn, the how to learn was less clear.

The final step in the participatory approach, that of a group evaluation was the most difficult one to accomplish. It would have been best had we captured the events and feelings of the day at the end of each session in the form of a brief summary . Often, though, participants got so caught up in the learning process that there was no time left for reflecting together as a group.

While the experience with the participatory approach was a new one for most learners in this study, and while it may not have been perfectly demonstrated at all times the

women all agreed they would attend another series based on the same principles.

Sam who struggled somewhat with the open-endedness of the program admitted that "it's good to pick our topics, we are more likely to follow up what we learned, because we are more involved" (Interview Nov. 13). Jane commented to the group at the Community Centre: "There should be more things happening like the sessions at the Tenant Centre". Helen had said earlier (Session June 6) "There should be little groups like this all over the city, where people can learn about what they are eating".

3) **What characteristics of adult learners can be identified by the participatory education process?**

The participant profiles presented earlier in this chapter give an in-depth description of the particular learners in this study, and the results of the questionnaire expand on it. This question deals primarily with their learning needs. The participants' individual circumstances are diverse, yet they have a number of characteristics in common, not only with other group members, but with many of the women in this or any neighbourhood in which families are marginalized due to

socio-economic, language, educational or similar barriers. It appears they are frustrated, vulnerable, sensitive, afraid of being wrong and hesitant to put forth their opinions and ideas unless they find themselves in a safe environment. A warm, accepting learning climate is of paramount importance, but it cannot stop there. Encouraging participants to take on responsibility for their own learning becomes a must if they aim to become less dependent on others and more powerful in making decisions that affect their well-being. When their daily lives are "in a shambles" there is often little time or energy left for learning and even less of a sense that they CAN learn. Low self-esteem and low self-confidence make it difficult, initially at least, to have them admit that they have much to contribute to the learning of others. Many have been told time and time again how they should live, eat, spend their money, and bring up their children, so much so that some have become resentful and perceive a course on food and nutrition as a potential for another series of shoulds and should-nots. Food is often the only budget item they have some control over, and they certainly don't want to be told what to do. This apprehension along with the lack of experience of being asked for input may explain their initial reluctance to becoming

involved and highlights the need for a longer program than the one in this study. Many women have to be encouraged to believe that they are capable and have something to contribute. This takes time.

The most striking characteristic of the participants of this study as expressed in every interview, is their need to talk, to discuss, to "having a say", "speaking our mind", "being heard". This need constituted one of the major reasons for continued attendance at the workshops. Even though some of the women knew each other they had to begin to feel more comfortable with each other in this new environment. The importance of being listened to and not being interrupted was underscored by the comments of one of the women. After the group had been rather large for one of the sessions she commented: "they wouldn't let you speak". She felt hurt and upset and would not have come back had the group stayed the same.

The educational level of the learners in this group ranged from completion of junior high school with serious literacy problems to some post highschool certificates. It is interesting that taking notes was important for some learners, and when spelling problems arose they were tackled by the group. Group members began to help each other and rely on each other more and more. I saw this as a positive sign.

4) What has been the learners' knowledge gain?

Answers to this question are not based on tests, the very idea of which runs counter to the educational approach being described here. Instead, participants volunteered the information informally, often at the beginning of a session. I simply had to listen carefully. In addition, the women reported to members in the community what they had learned, which is probably more reliable since they did not have to impress anyone. The follow-up interviews, however, contained a question directly related to their perception of any knowledge gain. Answers given to the second round of interviews five months after the course were almost identical to the first. Rose was the only one who had trouble after the time lapse to recall any details, possibly because she is the one who does least of the actual shopping and cooking. While the first round yielded more detail from the women the second is more impressive, because by this time the knowledge they had gained had become more crystallized and is likely to be remembered. As one might expect it was the practical information that stayed with them the longest. While our discussion of cholesterol and fats, for example, seemed important to

them at the time, it most likely provided only a theoretical awareness, as realistically most of the women are unable to spend money on the healthier fats and leaner meats. Food choices available to low-income consumers are often very restricted, but the realization that we "don't need all these processed foods, but can eat good and healthy just on basic foods" was a welcome one. "And it may be even better for you." Someone even expressed the need to be "cautious about believing all the advertising for overprocessed foods". Most of the women said they had become more aware consumers through the discussions. Unit pricing was one new tool they had acquired. Another tool was more intensive label reading, because the information now made more sense to them and gave them a better idea of what they are paying for. The vast variety of legumes and grains, their nutritional quality and their usefulness in a balanced diet was another topic they all remembered. Because of the nature of the discussion of brands and grades together with a taste test the women felt they now had a better idea of what to look for in foods. For some that activity, however, confirmed a cherished belief that national brand name products are best after all.

While the women may have learned a great deal they quickly conceded that there is much more to learn. And

one way of learning they felt, was through sharing with others. And that is exactly what they did, first with family members ("I came home and told I. everything I learned today" Betty told me), then with community members and even with the child care workers. The latter were invariably invited to taste the new foods and given a brief synopsis of the session. "You can't learn everything you want in one course, but getting some sources for further information helps, too." Several of the women followed up on the suggestion that food and nutrition publications were available from a government department, and they ordered personal copies. Handouts from our sessions were passed on to another community group, and in one instance became the basis for an extensive discussion on price differences between various sources of protein. It was that excitement for learning that encouraged me to continue with the process.

5) **What changes in eating/shopping behaviour have occurred?**

I realized that while nutrition information and knowledge can contribute to a more nutritious diet the reality of the social and personal barriers low income people often

face may prevent them from integrating that knowledge into their daily lives. I was therefore almost surprised, yet pleased, to find that the women had indeed made some changes in their shopping and food preparation behaviours. To find out more I added a question to the second telephone follow-up interview asking what might have prompted these changes. In some cases it was fear of ill health for themselves or their children, in others a desire to pass on better habits to their children, for yet others a matter of "budget considerations". Some felt they had realized that the purchase of "basic foods" and of less meat and fat might actually free up some money for more fruit and vegetables. But they all admitted to the difficulty of making changes, be it because of habits or strong likes and dislikes of family members, especially among children - "you can't let them starve". In lives where there are so few pleasures food is often used as a reward, as something special. Changing to a more nutritious diet is perceived as depriving children of the simple pleasures. Besides, mothers simply become tired of saying 'no'. Change would have to be slow and internally driven. "You have to really <u>want</u> to change because old habits are hard to break--the more you deny yourself something the more you want it, and then you feel guilty" (Sam, Interview Nov.13).

Cooperation of spouses is sometimes also difficult to get. One of the women was so pleased with a meatless chili she had tasted she suggested to make it immediately and serve it on Father's Day. For a meat eater this suggestion was not a welcome one. So they compromised, and she served it a day later. Much to the husband's surprise the meal was indeed acceptable, even tasty, and he has eaten it many times since along with other meals based on reduced use of meat and more beans. It was the bean cookery that captured the interest of all the women, despite the reputation of the bean as "poor man's food".

An increased awareness of the importance of label reading had an impact on most learners' shopping habits. "I've become very conscious about it, I want to know what I put on the table" is a comment echoed by all but one of the participants. "My husband used to just pick up items he wanted, now I'm reading deeply into it" (Helen, Interview Nov. 21). This woman had actually initially felt that label information did not contribute much to her purchasing decisions.

Using unit pricing as an aid to price comparison is the other major change in shopping behaviour the learners reported having kept up over the last few months. Insignificant as these small changes may appear in terms

of the magnitude of food insecurity most of the participants experience, they may have contributed in some way to a sense of increased control over a portion of their food dollar and ultimately of their own and their children's well-being.

While long-term outcomes are too distant and ambitious for such a short program there may be some truth in the following statement: "Education is not concerned with changing behaviour...but with making a change in behaviour a possibility" (Lawton, 1973, p.74).

6) **What is the learners' satisfaction with what they learned?**

Wanting to continue with a course beyond the given timelines seems to be a good indicator of satisfaction with the program. The statement "I enjoyed it" was elaborated on with comments like:

"I just <u>had</u> to know this information",

"I learned a lot",

"I'm beginning to see where I'm going wrong: too much fat from meat--could switch to including more beans--less fat, less money",

"it boosted my confidence; before I was scared to try;

then I saw how easy it really is--nutrition isn't as complicated as it's made out to be",

"I was exposed to so many things I didn't know before",

"I got a lot of information",

"it's good to learn to do things for ourselves",

"it was very practical",

"there is so much to learn, so much!"

"six weeks is too short, 1 1/2 hours are too short"

"all that information out there is so confusing, it's good to learn more",

"this will help stop money from going down the drain"

"this helped me to see what some of the foods <u>should</u> look like",

"it will help reduce food costs".

If these comments sound rather glowing, it is probably not so much the result of the content of this course but rather a combination of content and process. Placing content into the context of a meaningful experience, where only the needs of the learners were addressed, and where the primary focus was not so much on giving nutrition information but on sharing of information about food and nutrition issues among the learners themselves.

This chapter started with a close look at some of the key features of the participatory approach: the group planning and decision-making process, the opportunities for hands-on experiences and the time given to sharing, questioning and reflection.

A detailed description of the learners followed: While the level of self-esteem among the women was generally low, they were capable and willing to articulate their needs, interests, priorities and opinions. Sometimes frustrated and vulnerable they needed a warm learning climate in which it was safe to talk, knowing that they were heard, valued and accepted.

The chapter finally documented an gratifying list of learning outcomes: greater general consumer awareness and the participants' willingness to share their existing and new knowledge and to act upon it.

It is now appropriate to not only reflect on participatory education as an effective approach to meeting the needs of the community but also on the roles the learners as well as the educator play in this process.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reflecting on the Participatory Approach

The discussion in this chapter is based on the conceptual framework presented in Chapter Three. It outlined a relationship between the context of the learner, the educator and the learning process and suggested that each affects the other and that together they shape the learning outcome.

1. Reflecting on the Process

"Meeting the needs of the learner" is often given as the raison d'être for adult education. We then typically proceed to speculate on those needs and build whole programs around them. Some of these needs, such as the need for a positive learning climate, have been well documented (Knowles, 1980; Brookfield, 1986), but we sometimes forget to listen closely to the more specific needs, goals or expectations of the participants and to involve them in planning to meet them.

The most obvious needs for the women in this study were easy access to the location of the program and an environment that was comfortable and safe from both an emotional and physical standpoint. The provision of childcare was an essential component of this environment. At the affective level there was a strong need for acceptance and at the cognitive level a need to learn how to shop and eat better for less, as well as to deal with controversies, media scares and distortions, and advertising pressures. Given that the learning experience was group-based one of the tasks of the group was to negotiate so that the group's needs as a whole were being met without the members giving up their individual goals. Sauvé (1987) outlines the process this way:

> Participation begins when a group of people make the decision to come together to be part of a group. Each may have different reasons for coming, and none of those reasons may be the reasons of the facilitators who initiated the meeting in the first place. Together the group works out why they want to be together, what they want to learn and how. Together they evaluate their learning on an on-going basis and let the evaluation inform their future learning efforts. Participation means naming the

> world for ourselves because in the naming is the making of new worlds or the reproduction of old ones (p.19).

The tremendous need for the individuals to speak, to be acknowledged, to be respected as capable group members regardless of educational or cultural background, to have their questions answered and to receive emotional support may be reflected in the group deciding that the "ideal" number for a group would be around six. It seemed the smaller the group the higher the satisfaction with the program. Compatibility of group members, they said, was also important, and this was briefly threatened when the group grew larger. All expressed relief when the group became smaller again, as they felt they could relate to each other better: "they are great people to relate to and interact with" (Fran). As they got to know everyone by name they felt increasingly comfortable to share, to help each other, to risk comments and questions and to let me as facilitator know what they liked and did not like. "It's our responsibility to let you know what the people want, you can't read minds" (Jane). Group building is important in most educational settings, but it definitely has to become an integral component of participatory education if it is to be successful. This process of developing openness and mutual trust requires

some willingness on everyone's part to give and take a little, but most of all it takes time.

On a poster I had made for the program I had listed some general principles that are necessary for a group to function effectively. I had made no reference to those during the sessions but asked during the first telephone interviews how important they thought these principles were. Flexibility and commitment were rated as the most important, followed by acceptance and participation. Flexibility, often difficult to implement in traditional programming, is an absolutely essential ingredient for a successful participatory learning experience, both from a content and a process perspective. Reflection did not appear important to them at the time.

We had taken some photographs to document the workshop series and later produced a small booklet for each participant. Figure 4 is a page from this booklet with comments by the participants regarding those principles.

Here are our good rules to remember
that make up a good group

One set of rules with some flexibility
makes a good co-operative group.

These Trues were good
for everybody in the group

- These seven words are what made
a group strong and lively - Amen

- A must for any successful group

Figure 4. Principles for Effective Groups

Developing a sense for the needs of the group paves the way for more successfully working together at meeting them and for participating in the process of learning, although the term "participating" means different things to different people. I asked the members of the group what participation meant to them and received answers that can be divided into two aspects: 1) sharing experience and 2) being heard. Participation is obviously more than giving people a chance to talk, even though that is extremely important to the learners. Here is what some of them said:

"sharing your experience makes you feel good inside",

"teaching someone else something you know increases your self-esteem",

"every person in the group has a say, has some input into what's being discussed",

"having input into the information and the process, so we can <u>all</u> learn from each other",

"being actively involved, not just sitting there, but saying your opinion, saying what you want to get out of it, not letting things just go by",

"everyone putting in their opinion",

"it's by talking to others that you get a lot of information; you go home and you are happy because you

learned a lot",

"you get your questions answered",

"you talk about things you care about, that are useful to you in your life",

"getting ideas from other women on how they do things",

"when you participate you gain and other people gain",

"just listening you could still gain information, but that is no good to the others; just listening, listening, listening; you are not dumb, this is why I said a smaller group is better, even someone shy can talk",

"it's better when people choose for themselves, they like it better",

"if you [as facilitator] choose yourself you'll be talking by yourself to yourself".

These are certainly strong statements in support of joint decision making for a meaningful program that is addressing the learner's issues and concerns and for allowing formative evaluation to occur. Because of the opportunities to contribute their rich experience, the women became excited about learning and showed an impressive degree of commitment to and ownership of the group. Viewing learners as capable is an important characteristic of participatory education. According to Sauvé (1987, p.15) "most educational programs are focused on what the learner lacks, participatory education is

focused upon what the learners bring to the learning context individually and in community with one another".

Participants in the workshop series were, however, also aware of some of the problems of this approach. One of the learners commented: "giving people options and encouraging them to make choices may actually be confusing for them" (Fran, Interview June 6) and lead to a program that is scattered and "off track". And for some "sticking to a topic" and "covering" a certain amount of content is indeed very important. Having identified their concerns and issues they simply wanted to hand over and "be taught". Participants felt though, they would get used to the challenge of increased responsibility but needed more time. Sauvé (1987) believes that

> such persons lack confidence in their own abilities to have ideas worthy of sharing with others and in their ability to make significant changes in their lives. The educator therefore cannot assume that the mere invitation will affect participation. The invitation to participate fully is only the beginning of a long, slow journey of experiences, where, little by little, people will experience their ideas as valuable and their efforts as worthwhile (p.19).

2. Reflecting on the Learners

When we planned the nutrition program we had anticipated to attract primarily single mothers on social assistance living in the housing complex around the Tenant Centre. As it turned out most of the women came because someone personally invited them. They were also reasonably motivated to learn more about the topic of food and nutrition. As people did not respond from the community at large, we were reminded again as to how difficult it is to reach potential learners and how we usually have to rely on those to come who are already connected to other agencies. The challenge continues to find those who are even more isolated and might benefit from a group learning experience.

In a context of poverty the women experience a multitude of stressors that interfere even with the attempts of the committed to be part of a learning experience. Poor housing, unstable relationships, low self-esteem and a poor self-image, often the result of overweight, ill-health of the children, behaviour problems, pregnancy, lack of support in times of emotional upheaval, even bad weather, can contribute to self-doubt, to a lack of feeling of being in control, to fear, anxiety, insecurity, anger, even despair, not exactly ideal

prerequisites for learning. I have to give a lot of credit to those women who came in the face of all these adversities and participated in making the group a safe place to learn. And as each woman struggled with her unique set of problems of abuse, divorce, health, misbehaving children, literacy, unemployment and lack of money, each made a unique contribution and enriched the group.

I was somewhat surprised though to find how hard the women were on themselves and others. Some made a number of unsolicited comments in the interviews about other low-income people in the community that may reflect reality but seemed rather harsh: "Low income people waste more food", "they won't volunteer", "they are always looking for handouts", "people eat what tastes good rather than what is good", "women from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to follow rather than make their own choices and decisions". May be these observations highlighted the contrast between others and themselves, as they felt they had made some movement. They agreed that this movement is slow:

> In a poverty situation you lose a lot of self-confidence, and it takes a lot to build you back up. You get knocked down so many times, you are scared to get back up. Being in a poverty situation people

> keep telling you that you can't do this or that. There are a lot of people out there who won't even look people in the eye, they don't feel they have the confidence any more (Jane, Interview June 8).

This may be one of the reasons why initially the women were hesitant to bring in recipes, a rather tangible evidence of their practices, to share with the group. Apart from the likelihood of a fairly limited repertoire there may be a feeling of insecurity, of fear to be hurt if someone does not approve. They may not want to put themselves in a vulnerable position or be put on the spot. Instead, they need encouragement and confirmation by others that they are "doing things right", "that it's o.k. what I'm doing", "I think I did pretty well". Again, the time factor is crucial. It took about three sessions for "the group to settle down and gel" (Sam) and establish rapport and trust with each other and with me. After that everyone was just amazed at "so much information coming out of peoples' heads" (Helen, Interview June 7).

One of the striking findings in this study for me was the incredible need for the women to talk, to exchange ideas, to tell their stories. Each one made some reference to that in the interviews. It appeared to be very important to "be able to say what I have to say", "to say my

opinion", "to be able to express yourself", "to talk", "to ask question", "to speak without being interrupted", "to share", "to be heard", "for everyone in the group to have a say", "to be listened to". It may be possible that many individuals in a marginalized environment fit the category of "silent knowers" as described by Belenky et al. (1986) in the book "Women's Ways of Knowing". Belenky distinguishes between five different categories to explain how women, in particular, make meaning in their lives. These include:

Silence---a position in which individuals experience themselves as mindless, voiceless and disconnected from others; they feel helpless, passive and dependent, much like the "oppressed" in Freire's writing.

Received knowledge---a position in which individuals depend on listening and external authority for knowledge; they absorb information but do not believe that they are capable of creating knowledge.

Subjective knowledge---individuals depend entirely on internal resources for valuing and knowing.

Procedural knowledge---individuals obtain knowledge by applying objective, logical, rational procedures.

Constructed knowledge---a position in which individuals view all knowledge as contextual. Such individuals construct their own meaning. Freire would probably label

them "empowered".

Learners in the nutrition program seemed to have had the desire of moving out of the depressing state of silence and move on to other "ways of knowing". Occasionally they may have come close to the position of constructed knowers for whom open conversation is most meaningful. Recognizing "ways of knowing" may assist in determining an effective educational approach with learners.

However, it appears the various categories are not static and learners are able to progress to other stages over time. Silent knowers need to be praised and have their skills and knowledge confirmed so they recognize the value of their experience. While most learners in this study probably started out in this position one or two could be more accurately described as received knowers - intolerant of ambiguity, wanting "correct" information and depending on the expert. It might be interesting to note that most of those falling into the category of received knowers did not stay with the group.

The value of this approach, according to Achterberg (1988b) "ultimately rests on [the] educators' ability to reflect upon and know themselves. They must develop their own perspectives to the point where they can understand, accept and accommodate themselves to others' ways of knowing" (p.1428).

3. Reflecting on the Role of the Educator

Over the course of this study it has become increasingly clear that in a participatory approach to education the educator does play a decisive role . In order to get a sense of how the participants perceived this role I asked some questions as to who they felt was or should be "in charge". They certainly objected to the notion of someone being "in charge" and suggested that "having a boss among us---that is no good". On the other hand they had some very high expectations of me or any educator for that matter. They were so high that I began to have personal doubts about my effectiveness as educator. The titles they chose for someone in the educator's role were quite varied: instructor, coordinator, organizer, expert, leader, spokesperson, group leader, and guide. They acknowledged that in order to be a "good" one there would be a "lot of pressure on the educator" (Betty, Interview June 6) because it is the educator's job to: give every one a fair hearing, provide reliable information, keep people actively involved, avoid split interests, provide structure, know a lot, avoid conflict, keep the session on track, ensure that everyone feels good as part of the group, **but** at the same time the women felt that the final responsibility for the success of the group had to rest

with the group. "One person coordinates, providing structure, making sure everything is going o.k., making sure there is no conflict...but the group members should decide what information they want...A group member could probably take on the role of coordinator, as long as they don't come across too much as an authority figure" (Sam, Interview June 8). "Everybody should be in charge, we know you bring in the information, you came in from the outside to teach us, but you didn't put yourself as the boss or come across like a boss because you were asking people questions and we were all talking" (Helen, Interview June 7). "The group leader acts as a guide and teaches the theory behind the methods, but the fundamentals should come from the group" (Fran, Interview June 6). There are times when it is important to check out information with someone who has studied the topic. "We could sit all night talking about food...we need someone we can rely on for accurate information" (Betty, Interview June 6) "because it's so confusing out there" (Sam). But it seemed important to the participants to feel free to make informed choices without being coerced.

The fact that some potential participants stayed away because they were afraid of being told what to eat concerned me. If this is what people associate with

nutrition education we have done them a disservice and obviously portrayed too many negative messages. We need to come across much more positively and "allow for change to happen rather than trying to impose change" (Sam). Even the choice of words we use can make the difference between nutrition messages being accepted or rejected. Words such as limit, reduce, decrease, avoid, cut out have been found to be discouraging as they have become equated with deprivation rather than a healthy lifestyle.

Over the course of the six weeks I became increasingly aware of the need for reflection, not only about the group process and dynamics, but particularly about my actions and reactions, my need for structure versus my tolerance for ambiguity, my level of comfort with giving up power and control to the group, of letting go, of finding a balance between content and process within the context of the learners, of being facilitator and expert. Personal journal entries repeatedly reflect that struggle through the term "chaos". Should a certain amount of ambiguity and fluidity around curriculum, intents and outcomes be interpreted as chaos and be perceived as a negative characteristic of participatory education? I think not, for this feeling was neither shared by the learners nor the colleague who sat in one of the

sessions. It might, however, reflect a sense of being overwhelmed with the complexity of the task at hand. Sauvé (1987) refers to this purposeful, intentional reflection as praxis and quotes Groome (1980) on page 26: "to understand praxis requires a shift in consciousness away from dichotomizing theory and practice, toward seeing them as twin moments of the same activity that are united dialectically."

She continues: "Praxis is practical; it is creative; it is activity which emerges out of our deeper understandings, and it is reflection which emerges out of that which our action has revealed to us" (p.26).

A Journal entry after the fourth session (June 6) summarized the demands I felt had been placed on me:

<u>A facilitator/educator needs to be</u>

-humble, able to let go, hand over responsibility and power and be prepared to be tour guide rather than driver;

-well prepared;

-flexible and willing to change direction (from weight loss to beans);

-open to negotiate change;

-listening;

-accepting;

-realizing I can't have all the answers or experiences;

-patient to let group grow; to let curriculum develop;

-not imposing;

-sensitive to the needs of the group that may not be directly expressed;

-encouraging to let people take over, recognizing and supporting their strengths;

-recognizing personal and group needs that may be overriding learning needs.

No wonder each session left me completely drained. I took some comfort in Sauvé's (1987) statement:

> As an educator, I choose to be responsible for creating a positive learning environment. I do not choose to be accountable for the learner's learning. For me to think myself accountable for either the success or failure of the learning enterprise for another is to create a dependency situation which I want to avoid. I do not want the learner to be dependent on me but to develop the skills necessary to learn independently...(p.24).

Providing that positive learning environment will go a long way towards meeting learner needs, both as individuals and as a group. The closer the match between learner needs and educator response the greater the chance for learner satisfaction with the process and the outcomes. Figure 5 summarizes the needs as expressed by

the group members in the study (upper portion of each cell) and indicates the actions taken by the educator in response to those needs (lower portion of each cell).

Individual - affective	Individual - cognitive	Group needs
sharing / build on	useful info / provide	action / support
acceptance / trust	doing / food prep. sampling	commitment / commitment
be heard / listen	contributing / plan together	flexibility / modify program

Learner Needs

Educator Response

Figure 5. Learner Needs and Educator Response

Starting with the individual's affective needs the bottom row represents the most pressing needs. While expressed in linear form in this figure it is understood that all the needs are closely related and interconnected.

The intent of this chapter was to bring the participatory approach into clearer focus through reflecting on the process, the learners and the educator, to show how each affects the other and ultimately determines the outcome.

Arising from this study are several implications for learners, educators, supporting agencies and researchers. A discussion of these will make up the final chapter of the report.

CHAPTER SIX

Implications for Practice and Research

This last chapter outlines implications for each of the actors in a participatory learning experience and raises further questions that beg to be answered in the future.

The term "participatory approach" refers to more than enrollment in a course; it indicates how adults "engage" themselves in learning (Selman & Dampier, 1991) and "refers to a tradition in which it is considered proper and helpful for the client, patient, community or the research subject to play an active role" (Schwab, 1987, p.234).

The concept of participation acknowledges learning as a dynamic exchange between educators and learners and is, in the view of Freire, "liberating and life confirming" (in Roter, 1987). In contrast, "the consequences of the omission of participation are oppression and alienation of the learner and the typification of the often referred to 'empty vessel' fallacy of...education" (p.29).

1. Implications for Learners

The design of this study was based on the premise that learners can and will play a crucial role in directing their own learning when given an opportunity to do so. Objectives and outcomes were not determined or imposed by professionals but grew out of the learners' interests and needs, thereby demonstrating mutuality as an essential feature of the participatory approach. Mutuality helps to ensure that "attention is being directed toward the issues regarded as the most important by those in the know. For the [learner] active participation offers a measure of self-determination" (Schwab, 1987, p.231) as it raises the critical awareness of the learners about themselves and their communities, it increases motivation to learn what they themselves deem as important deepens their sense of commitment to and ownership of the learning process.

It is interesting to note that the learners in this workshop series clearly articulated their needs and preferences. Not only did they take responsibility for determining what they wanted to learn, they expressed how they might best accomplish it, namely through very small groups, a flexible program design, hands-on experiences

and an accepting learning climate in which each person was given a voice.

As discussed previously (Chapter 2) there are several levels of participation, from merely attending an educational program to being involved in designing and implementing it. For the purpose of this study I superimposed Jurmo's (1989) continuum of participation on to the steps of Bannister and Monsma's (1980) model of consumer education to conceptualize the potential effect of participation on consumer behaviour (Figure 6). As with all models one needs to remember that they are not static and only serve as an illustration. Each level appears to build on the other, yet the divisions are rather fluid. An individual could be at several levels at the same time or move from one to another depending on the learning context. In the case of this study the learners benefitted directly from the acquisition of skills and knowledge. This was very important, but at the same time the experience with taking on increased responsibility for participation and accountability for learning also contributed to increased questioning and critical thinking.

One tool to engage learners in critical thinking is called "problem-posing" suggested by Freire. It involves critical reflection of both educator and learner through

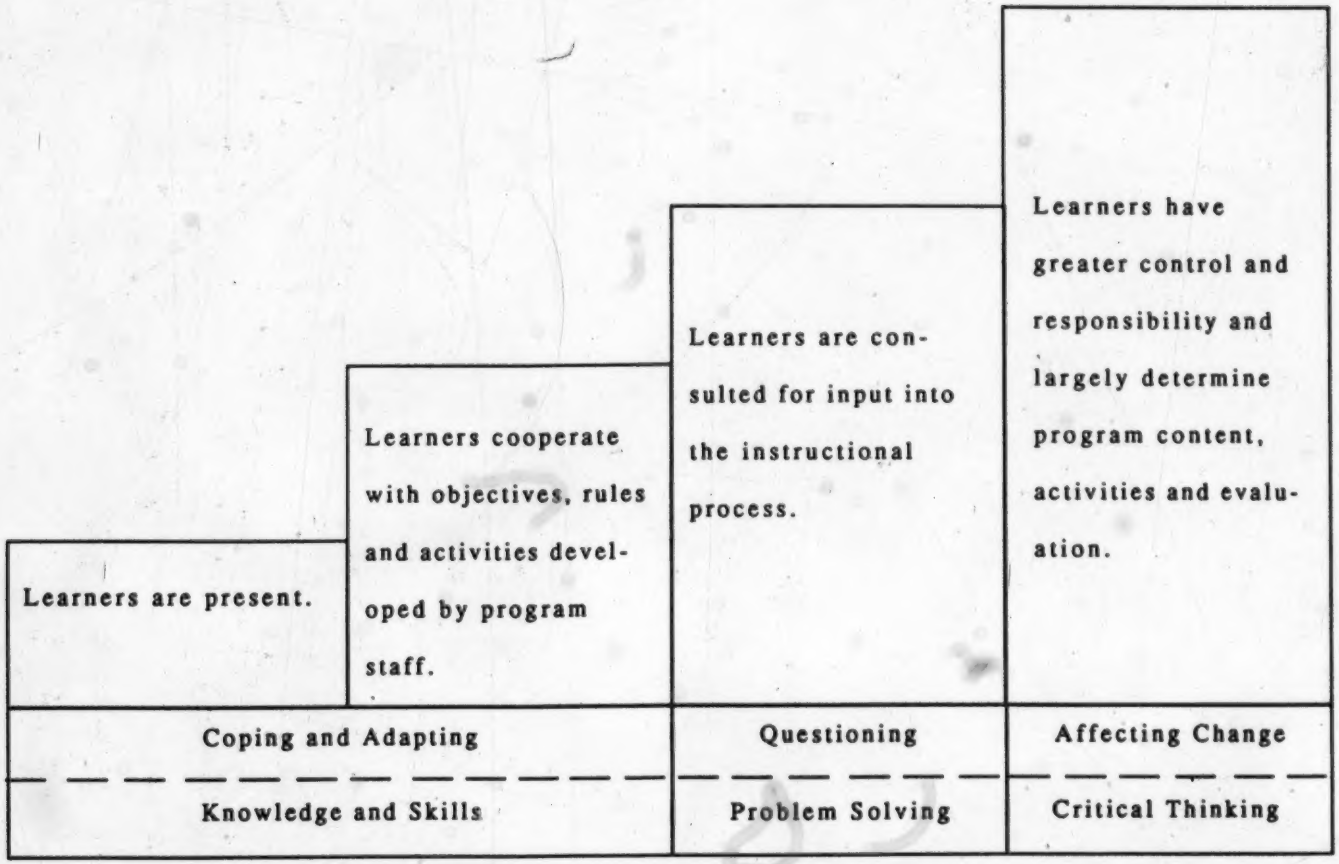
Learners are present.
Learners cooperate with objectives, rules and activities developed by program staff.
Learners are consulted for input into the instructional process.
Learners have greater control and responsibility and largely determine program content, activities and evaluation.
Coping and Adapting
Questioning
Affecting Change
Knowledge and Skills
Problem Solving
Critical Thinking

Figure 6. Levels of Learner Participation and Their Effect on Consumer Behaviour. Adapted from Jurmo (1989) and Bannister (1980).

questioning which allows people to move out of their personal experiences into a broader understanding and move the dialogue to a higher level of thinking (Sauvé, 1987, p.50).

In traditional nutrition education programs the ultimate goal is to change health behaviours. The assumption is that those behaviours are the results of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes and that specific behaviours, when changed, improve health. This notion of definite measurable outcomes as a result of education programs has been challenged as the mediating factors of self-efficacy (the belief in one's ability to perform a specific behaviour) and locus of control (the degree to which one feels that a particular situation is within one's control) have been added. People with internal control generally enjoy better health as a result of their active involvement in health-promoting behaviours. In contrast, people with an external locus of control believe that powerful other and external forces or circumstances shape their destiny, so individuals will only take action if they perceive that the action will work (Hayes & Ross, 1987; Bambra, 1990).

A high external locus of control is correlated with low self-esteem, a characteristic many of the hard-to-reach adults in this study share. In order to have effective

learning programs that will enhance self-esteem, support systems for the learners' often fragile motivation have to be incorporated. The amount of support necessary probably depends on where on the participation continuum the learners are. Bambra (1990) suggests a need for three types of support. "Through the program elements of food and nutrition information (cognitive support), emotional support, and material support, we hope to improve the personal elements of competence regarding food issues, self-esteem, and ability to cope with stress so that individual and collective actions can be taken to enhance food security" (p.10). Brickman (1982), however, warns that in an effort to provide support it is easy to apply the paternalistic model of helping when instead we need to work from a partnership model.

Even though not all participants in a course are present in order to achieve certain educational goals but come because the activity provides a break from routine or a social opportunity to meet people, I found it gratifying that all members of this group reported that they had learned something.

Participants may or may not learn and apply what <u>we</u> had intended as this assumes that the learners should be interested in the program and outcomes because the planners are. Clark (1990) in her description of the

Kenyan project mentioned earlier, goes as far as stating that it is "programs that fail, not people" (p.56). But people do sometimes make choices that may fail them, yet if we believe that they are accountable for their own learning we may have to accept their choice even if it does not match our hopes for them. Sauvé (1987) concurs:

> In participatory education, I do not see it as the educator's responsibility to push this choice or that but to support the learners in asking questions, gathering information, acquiring sought-after skills, clarifying issues and seeing the implications for a variety of proposed solutions to problems, and finally, to accept the learners' right to make the decisions most meaningful to them (p.15).

Only then can we speak of education as "empowerment". It means listening to and acknowledging learners' realities, and affirming peoples' self-worth and sense of control, a feeling that they have control over at least a small aspect of their life. It means helping people to gain access to information, to learn not only how to learn but also what to learn and why. It means allowing people "to work through their capabilities to develop a sense of being, of dignity and self-esteem" (Arturo Lizardi, Literacy Conference, Edmonton, Oct. 1990).

2. Implications for Educators

Among the implications of this study those applicable to the educators seem to be the most far reaching.

While learners may have initial reservations about the participatory approach because it may be a process they are not accustomed to they soon begin to appreciate the freeing nature of its philosophy. In contrast, educators may have more reservations about embracing a relatively unknown educational approach. In the past much lip service has been paid to involving learners in program planning, but it is often difficult for professionals to delegate and share power and truly become partners in learning.

One of the reasons Schwab (1987) cites for the fact that the participatory approach has not been easy to adopt is the basic philosophical stance of most educators who are trained and accustomed to professionally-based rather than partnership-based decision-making. The participatory approach "requires profound changes in values, attitudes and organizational structures" (p.329), it requires professionals "to be able to recognize and sometimes lay aside their own biases, in order to focus more clearly on the needs and perceptions of their

clients" (p.327).

1) Ideal Characteristics of Educators

Schwab isolates three attributes an educator needs to possess or foster: self-knowledge, tolerance of others and an ability to maintain open conversation.

> Self-knowledge is an understanding of ourselves, as individuals and as part of cultures, with all the inherent bias that this reveals...Tolerance may be seen as the ability to listen without comment, to be able to open oneself to the...point of view of others. It implies being prepared to relinquish the urge to control...Only when there is a measure of self-knowledge, and of tolerance for others, can open conversation develop...for dialogue...rests on mutual respect (p.325).

Achterberg (1988b) suggests that learners who are "oppressed by poverty, prejudice or joblessness...will probably not be receptive to nutrition education". But she proposes that empathy, rapport and positive interaction between the nutrition educator and the learner can go a long way towards a positive learning climate. Empathy is especially important "because it cements connections between learners and educators and provides a basis for understanding between individuals" (p.1427).

Stephen Brookfield, a well-known adult educator, extends the list of characteristics of good educators: they need to be compassionate, questioning, credible and authentic, ready to admit error, congruent in thought and action; a formidable list indeed (Conference in Calgary, May 1989). Brookfield sees the role of an educator as one that helps learners articulate and expand their latent knowledge, but most of all stretches, moves and prompts people to look at familiar behaviours from an alternative perspective. Challenging peoples' dominant values is an art. Brookfield stresses the importance of affirming people first before challenging them, and to challenge one's own values before expecting others to do it.
A major purpose for an educator is to "make a dent in peoples' lives", and to encourage critical thinking. Becoming critical thinkers is probably impossible without external prompting, but is necessary for daily survival. It is defined as a process around identifying, questioning, evaluating, and reframing assumptions, activities that will ultimately lead to a more democratic and just society.
Brookfield promotes two concepts that proved an invaluable guide for me as adult educator:
1) teaching should be grounded in the experience as reported by the learners, and flexible enough to

negotiate with the learners if a change in direction is indicated; and

2) teaching should be critically responsive, guided by a clear working philosophy, yet responsive to emerging concerns of the learners and the context of learning.

While for some people the definition of participatory education as "everyone is an expert" may give the impression that educators shirk their responsibility, Brookfield insists that educators need to demonstrate content mastery and experience, as too much equalizing may be deflating to learners. It is important for people to feel confident that it is worthwhile spending time with the leader, that he/she has something to offer. He quotes Freire: "If I didn't think that what I had to say was worthwhile I shouldn't be here". We need to acknowledge and legitimize the knowledge of others without negating our own, we need to negotiate rather than give up. Participants thus learn to use the expertise of the professionals while the professionals learn how to share their expertise. For some of the women in Belenky's study (1986) experts must "reveal an appreciation for complexity and a sense of humility about their knowledge...they had to reveal that they 'listened' to people and gave equal weight to experience and abstractions". It was important that the "theories and

recommendations of experts were grounded in real life and the data of the everyday" (p.139).

2) Importance of a Clear Working Philosophy

Lizardi, a Mexican educator, defines a teacher/educator as "a person who is helping you to see your face". He encourages us as educators to try and understand the people, the physical and social context of their lives, but most of all to understand ourselves, in a spirit of humility. Apps (1989) too, urges every adult educator to carefully examine his or her values and beliefs as they form the foundations for effective teaching. Such an analysis can lead to the development of a

> working philosophy of adult education, a solid foundation to undergird [your] everyday practice. A working philosophy is, of course, more than merely working out what you believe about learners, aims, subject matter, and the teaching-learning transaction. There is a strong relationship among the various elements of the framework. What you believe about adults as learners, their potential, and their reasons for learning will influence how you view the teaching-learning process. What you see as the role for subject matter is likely to influence what you believe is the aim for what you do, and so on. Your working philosophy may change--

> indeed, in most instances it will change--as you face new challenges and problems. But the process for examining and fine-tuning your beliefs can serve as a constant (p.26/7).

In a recent article Achterberg (1990) calls for practitioners to "evaluate whether or not their programs and everyday practices are compatible with their philosophical beliefs...and as a group [to] move towards some consensus on the issue of our philosophical perspective, because this will give birth to a paradigm that can be used to both guide and distinguish the field of nutrition education" (p. 193).

The act of teaching in a participatory mode requires educators who are willing to challenge themselves, who are willing to take risks and tolerate zones of ambiguity, chaos and crisis. One could liken the experience to white-water rafting, an exhilarating, though sometimes dangerous, experience, one in which the educator tries to find a balance between action and reflection, between individual and group needs, between affirming students and stretching them.

But neither learners nor educators can be seen in isolation. The very essence of participatory education lies in their interdependence.

3. Implications for Sponsoring Agencies

From an organizational perspective it is tempting to look for an "all-purpose" educational program that is efficient and economical. Although this report has described participatory education as one approach to nutrition education that seems to have provided meaning for the learners, it is not simply a task of designing that one "perfect" nutrition curriculum that will consistently be effective for all population groups. Central control of programming in which we decide what they ought to learn may provide security for insecure teachers, but it isolates and objectifies learners and makes ownership of the learning process impossible for the learners. Given the rather successful context of the case study reported here, one may assume that participatory education is probably the choice approach for all hard-to-reach adults. But some words of caution are in order. There may be some risks in trying to apply the participatory model to all learning situations. In the following situations the participatory approach might be less appropriate:

1) The subject matter may be of a highly technical nature with fixed performance criteria that are not negotiable.

2) Teachers vary in experience, in personal style and working philosophy. Those who do open up the learning process to the students may do so awkwardly, ineffectively, or indiscriminately. Some of these factors emanate from the teacher as a person rather than as a professional.

3) Learners may have preconceived ideas that the course of study should follow traditional content and style. Such a group might indeed be resentful of any suggested departure from the teacher-driven curriculum.

4) There are also certain given factors in the learning environment that are not readily under the educator's control. While physical environmental obstacles can be overcome to some extent it would be risky to ignore expectations by the sponsoring agency or educational authority of measurable outcomes.

The participatory approach can and does work well for some people in some learning situations. The risk is that removing structure and authority can be confusing if not traumatic to the learner. Belenky (1986) makes this observation: "All of the women wanted some structure in their educational environment...Overburdened by responsibilities at home and at work they have neither the time nor the energy to map out their own structure" (p.204). Some of this initial reluctance may be overcome

by gradual exposure to the process; chances are that the learners, as did the women in this study, will ultimately acknowledge the benefits of the partnership in learning.

Based on my experience with the participatory approach it would be fair to say that if an agency decides on the appropriateness of a participatory learning project as an alternative mode of education for the disadvantaged, several responsibilities will follow suit:

1) Allocation of staff whose philosophy is compatible with the participatory approach. For debriefing purposes in particular it would be advisable to have two co-facilitators, with one potentially coming from the group. Ideally this co-facilitator could eventually be starting another group, thus creating a ripple effect.

2) Allocation of funds sufficient to provide childcare and other material support. In the case of this study money was needed for snacks and groceries as cooking and sampling became an increasingly important program element.

3) Allocation of time. This is probably the most crucial factor for an effective participatory nutrition program. The six weeks proved far too short for this group, so did the weekly sessions. Adding preparation and debriefing time the long-term commitment is enormous. Participatory

education takes time, something we need to come to terms with in this fast-paced society.

4) Allocation of administrative support in the event the educator or the participants wish to document the learning process in a creative way. In our case we put together a photo record with comments by the participants. One of the women did most of the work and proudly distributed the booklets to the other participants.

5) Commitment to effectiveness. The small group seemed to have provided the optimal medium for learning for the women in this study. They repeatedly emphasized that the size of the group played a major role in their level of satisfaction with the participatory approach. Clark (1990) experienced a similar sentiment, though groups in her study were larger. She says: "Small may be beautiful, but faced with the alarming scale of developmental needs and problems, we may be tempted to resort to mass production approaches which appear more efficient" (p.44). This, however, may not be in the best interest of the disadvantaged adult learner.

4. Implications for Researchers

The findings of this study lead to two major implications for researchers.

1) Continuing Research

At a time when budget cuts in education are the order of the day it is becoming harder to rationalize further research. However, as pointed out earlier, (p.3) the Government has called for funds to be allocated for innovative approaches to nutrition education. It remains to be seen whether this will indeed become a reality. While combining the role of educator and researcher poses some difficulties, especially for the novice researcher, the task can be a rewarding experience if the issue of bias is addressed. It provides a unique opportunity for deeper understanding of both roles. There is no doubt that a co-facilitator/researcher would permit more extensive and comparative as well as longer-term studies, but budget constraints will often prevent this dream from becoming a reality. Nonetheless, not to do the somewhat more limited research at all would mean the loss of potentially valuable insights.

It appears that qualitative research approaches are

appropriate for case studies such as the one described in this paper, as they tend to be less threatening to the learner and examine content as well as context.

2) Sharing Research

Given the positive feedback from the learners in this study educators should be encouraged to facilitate small group development and to document successful educational approaches on a more regular basis. More case studies such as the one described in this report will provide a broader base for practitioners. There is an urgent need for educators to connect with each other and to share their successes and dilemmas. But most of all we need to hear from the learners themselves to answer many of the questions that are raised when one engages in participatory education.

1) How do the past experiences of the learners determine their choice of educational approach?

2) How do educational level, ethnicity, learning style or age affect acceptance of the participatory approach?

3) Is group building a necessary prerequisite for effective participation to occur?

4) How can the participatory approach be modified for single sessions?

5) What has to occur for group members to move from individual action to community action?

These and other questions will remain unanswered unless more educators are willing to explore with the learners new avenues for increasingly emancipatory learning.

SUMMARY

This study was designed to answer the question: What is the value and effectiveness of a participatory community-based nutrition program for hard-to-reach adults?

The value of a participatory nutrition program as experienced by the learners has been described at length in Chapter Four. They saw direct value in the practical hands-on elements of the program as well as in the more intangible benefits of having had an opportunity to talk, to share and to question. I believe that this was not simply the result of being part of a research project, because the women soon ignored the research components and instead became fully absorbed in the process of learning.

Evidence of effectiveness has come through positive feedback, both directly and indirectly, and through reports by the participants of increased awareness of some aspects of nutrition and of implementing some new skills.

Overall I probably benefitted the most from the

experience. My dual role of facilitator and researcher not only gave me some insight into the participants' point of view, it also allowed me to examine and reflect on my role and philosophy as educator. In addition, it taught me that there is no such thing as a "perfect" approach or a "perfect" application of the approach. Instead, each "practice" contributes to a better understanding of what it means to work <u>with</u> rather than <u>for</u> people. Participatory education in its fullest meaning remains a challenging ideal, one that requires a fair share of realistic optimism, but it is an experience worth repeating. In fact, I have since started a similar but somewhat longer series with another group. My approach is based on the same principles discussed throughout this study: experience-based and flexible programming; an atmosphere of acceptance and trust; belief in the learners' ability to direct and evaluate their learning while acknowledging that that learning takes place in the broader context of their lives; commitment to enriching what the learners already know and challenging them to learn more, to question and to ultimately make changes that will positively affect their daily lives.

This study is not a prescription of how to do participatory education, it is much more an account of

what we observed together as we struggled at times to come to terms with a meaningful way of learning. There is no doubt that the process takes longer than some traditional programs, but I see it as a more effective approach to community nutrition education. When weighing the costs and benefits of the program I posed the question in my Journal (July 9): "Is participatory education a luxury we can ill afford, or is it an approach we can ill afford not to use"? I hope many more educators will ask the same question in the future.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

What do you think?

Please circle the response that describes best what you think.

SA = Strongly Agree

A = Agree

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly Disagree

1. Knowledge about nutrition is important. SA A D SD
2. Nutritious meals are expensive . . . . SA A D SD
3. Preparing nutritious meals takes a lot of time . . . . . SA A D SD
4. Children learn about good food choices at home . . . . . SA A D SD
5. Information about nutrition is confusing. SA A D SD
6. Vitamins are necessary to supplement the diet. . . . . SA A D SD
7. There are too many additives in food . SA A D SD
8. Nutrition information on food labels helps one to choose foods . . . . . SA A D SD
9. It is difficult to plan nutritious meals, because of everybody's likes and dislikes. . . . . SA A D SD
10. It is healthier to eat less red meat . SA A D SD

Nutrition information can come from many sources. Please circle all those you use.

1. TV
2. Radio
3. Books
4. Newspaper(s) - which? _____
5. Magazine(s) - which? _____
6. Newsletters from school
7. Pamphlets
8. Family members
9. Friends or neighbours
10. Doctor or nurse
11. Labels on food
12. Talks
13. _____

Which two do you like the best?

_____

_____

What do you do?

Please mark your answers with a check ( ) mark. You can check several answers if they apply to you.

I do most of my grocery shopping at

___ IGA

___ Safeway

___ Food for Less

___ Superstore

___ Convenience store

___ other - please explain

I get there by

___ bus

___ car

___ walking

___ taxi

___ with a friend

___ other - please explain

I usually shop

___ daily

___ once a week

___ 2-3 times/week

___ once a month

___ other - please explain

On average I eat away from home

___ once a day

___ once a week

___ 2-3 times/week

___ 2-3 times/month

If I run out of food money I

___ do without

___ get help from family or friends

___ ask my social worker for help

___ go to the food bank

___ NA

My favourite foods are . . . . . .

I really dislike . . . . . .

My child's favourite foods are . . . . . .

My child hates these foods . . . . . .

Please circle the response that describes best what you do.

A = Always

S = Sometimes

N = Never

I plan the main meals a week in advance . . . . . A S N

I make a shopping list . . . . . A S N

I stick to my shopping list . . . . . A S N

I read food labels . . . . . A S N

I understand food labels . . . . . A S N

I record my food expenditures . . . . . A S N

I do all the food preparation . . . . . A S N

I enjoy cooking . . . . . A S N

My family eats a healthy diet . . . . . A S N

My children help out . . . . . A S N

My children are picky eaters . . . . . A S N

My children eat breakfast . . . . . A S N

My children eat fruits and vegetables . . . . . A S N

My children eat low-sugar snacks . . . . . A S N

I eat a good breakfast . . . . . A S N

I use whole grain products . . . . . A S N

Please share some information about yourself.

My age is ___ under 25

___ 25-35

___ over 35

My childrens' ages are ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

Other members living in the household _____

I am ___ single

___ married

___ divorced

___ separated

I receive social allowance ___

I am employed ___ part-time

___ full-time

I live in subsidized housing

I have completed ___ Junior High School

___ High School

___ Post-Secondary Diploma or Degree

___ Training Certificate

___ Other- please explain

Thank you.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What aspects/parts/activities have you enjoyed the most/the least so far? (size of group, topics, etc.)

2. How do you feel about being asked to take part in making program planning decisions?

3. Do you feel you have enough say in planning the program, setting goals, selecting activities?

4. What would you like to change?

5. a) Who should be in charge?
   b) What does "being in charge" mean to you?

6. What might be the best way for participants to let the facilitator know if a change in program direction should be made?

7. What does "participation" mean to you? How important is participation in relation to getting information?

8. A workshop has been "fun" when...

9. How do you learn best?

reading a book/pamphlet

listening and taking notes

discussing

practical experience

watching someone

writing tests

teaching someone else

other

10. How could we reach other people?

sharing written materials

displays in mall

informal talk over coffee

workshops

other

FIRST TELEPHONE FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW

1. If someone asked you to describe the workshops you attended at ... , what would you say?

2. What have been the strengths of the program?
   (e.g. childcare, recipes, discussions, other group members, relevant information)

3. What have been the weaknesses?
   (e.g. length of program, group members, not relevant)

4. What would you like to see changed?

5. What made you come back time and time again?

6. What suggestions/do's and don'ts do you have for educators?

7. Do you feel you had enough chances to contribute to the program?

8. How satisfied are you with what you learned?
   Please rate on a scale from 1-5.

9a. Can you think of two or three things you learned?

b. Have you made any changes as a result of this learning?

10. If the group was to continue, can you think of a name for it?

11. I had listed the following words on a poster:

flexibility
commitment
capability
participation
reflection
acceptance
accountability

Please rank the order of their importance for a group as very important, important or not important.

12. What topics would you suggest for further workshops?

SECOND TELEPHONE FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW

1. Can you remember two or three things you learned in our discussions at ...?

2. Have you made any changes in shopping, eating, cooking as a result of participating in the sessions? Can you give examples?

3. Why do people change/don't change their ways as a result of having learned something new?
   What has to happen for change to occur?

4. How important was it for you to participate in the learning process rather than just getting information and recipes?